

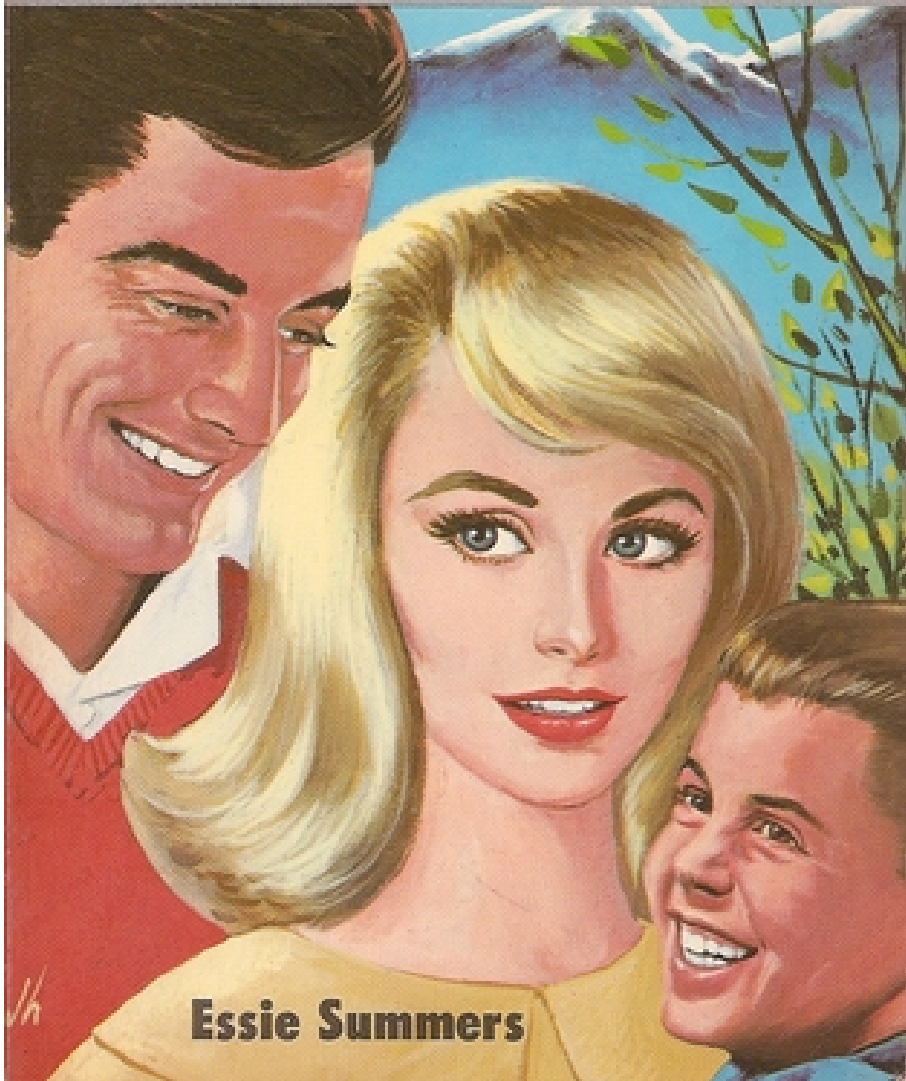


1055

A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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HEIR TO WINDRUSH HILL



Essie Summers

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It was affection for the orphaned triplets that led Janet MacGregor to deceive the wealthy old Mr. MacNee and Morgan Mackay and took her across the world from Scotland to New Zealand.

And then she was caught up in another charade--a fake engagement to Morgan himself.

To another indomitable Janet— Janet Boyd Clark, *nee* Muir, who at the turn of the century, as a bride of twenty, followed her man to some of the loneliest lighthouses on the New Zealand coast.

CHAPTER ONE

JANET MACGREGOR clenched her hands, glared at the letter and said: "Over my dead body!"

Then she bit her lip, opened her hands in a despairing gesture and found the lines on the letter on the table had blurred. Because what was the use of a challenge like that when there was nobody here to take it up? When your protagonist was thousands of miles away, down at the bottom of the world? And even the letter was only a lawyer's.

Of course, Thomas MacNee *would* have a lawyer in London—even at that distance. When you were wealthy you could have anything. You could order other people's lives, disrupt them, separate children from all that was known and dear and familiar to them. She'd always wondered if Cecile had been fair to her father-in-law, if he really had been as black as she had painted him, but now she knew. He was an autocrat, utterly devoid of decent feelings!

She looked down at the letter. Some sentences stood out more than others.

". . . My client feels that it is infinitely preferable to have the children make a complete break and build new lives in a country that is their own, in any case. So he wishes me to advise you that you need no longer have any responsibility for them. They will be well cared for and their future will be assured. He is making personal arrangements for their voyage to New Zealand.

"His nephew, Mr. Mackay, who is at present on the Continent and will be coming to London to see me to make arrangements for accompanying the children to New Zealand, will see to everything. Mr. MacNee has already made bookings from his end—high

priority ones —and these allow for the children to be accompanied by a nanny. I have inserted advertisements for this position and will ask Mr. Mackay to interview the applicants on his arrival back in London. I should imagine there will be many answers, the pay offered is excellent and it will be first-class accommodation both ways, and the nanny is to stay a month at Windrush Hill to settle the children in.

"Mr. MacNee wishes me to convey to you that your suggestion that the children should remain in Scotland under your care does not meet with his approval at all. That it is not at all suitable that the children should remain in the care of a single girl with no home of her own and the possibility of getting married some day and then finding the children a burden to her. Now is the time for the children to make the break. He feels they need, at last, a settled life. And he is of the opinion that they will more readily and easily settle if all links with the old life are relinquished. He also instructed me to say that had there been any relationship between you and the children, it might have been different."

No, there was no relationship . . . only the ties of love. Janet felt desperate. She had no standing in law. Her mother had married Louis Fremont, and after her death he had married Cecile MacNee, the widowed daughter-in-law of the old despot, Thomas MacNee, and mother of three children, triplets.

How could she let them go? They looked to her, had done so for the last three years, for something a little more stable in their ever-changing lives.

The London solicitors had got in touch with her soon after the skiing tragedy happened that had taken Louis and Cecile. It had been reported on the other side of the world even. She supposed vaguely that things like that were copied everywhere.

Thomas MacNee had cabled his solicitors immediately that the children were to be shipped out to him. Janet had made a desperate bid to keep them here, had replied saying the children were being well cared for and that if the grandfather would continue their allowance she would look after them, would write him regular reports of their welfare, their progress at school, everything.

She had accomplished nothing whatever.

Not that she had formed any cut-and-dried plan. It was certain that she could not keep them with her here in the district nurse's cottage. Cramped conditions didn't matter in the meantime but would later. And while Hetty Sinclair was willing to come and stay at nights till she got something settled, even that couldn't last for ever, and as she never knew when she would be called out at night for accident or midwifery, someone just had to be here.

If only Louis and Cecile had named her as guardian! But of course Cecile had a lot of native shrewdness under her frothy manner, and in the end money always counted with Cecile. So she would have wanted financial security for her children too. Besides, who could have foreseen they would both go so young?

How could she tell the children? At ten years old you lived entirely in the present. You had no philosophy to tide you over a bad patch, no experience at the back of you to make you realise that though changes seemed unbearable at first, in time you became accustomed to them. That the utter misery of parting would yield in time to new happinesses.

But would it? With a flinty-hearted old ramrod-type of a grandfather like Thomas MacNee? She wondered if that disagreeable housekeeper who had been there in Cecile's time and

who had hated her so was still with him. What would she know of children, especially these children?

She'd had no time for foreigners, Cecile had said. Was a mischief-maker, malicious . . . would she transfer that antagonism to Therese who also bore a French name?

Would anyone there realise that triplets needed special understanding, that though they shared a birthday, they reached various stages in development and school work at different times and that no one of them must be nagged to keep up with the others, that they must make their own pace?

How could she tell them they were to go to the Antipodes with a pair of strangers? Janet felt nausea sweep over her. How cushion the blow? How make them feel it was a gay adventure and not a tearing-apart of their lives? That they might never see her again.

The idea hit Janet.

What was to stop her going to New Zealand too? She had enough money to get her there and to keep her till she got a job. Nurses were acceptable anywhere. She could get a position in the nearest hospital. Where would that be? Cecile had been so vague about that part of her life.

She had dwelt on the isolation, the cold, the utter impossibility of getting domestic help with no city lights anywhere to attract a girl. She'd had everything to do for the babies. The hard-faced Elvira had attended to the house, nothing else. No girl would have stayed with Elvira, anyway. She reigned supreme, worked hard, but liked it.

But there had been a small town near . . . something about water, she thought. Would it be Spring something? Or Brook something?

She got out a *Pears Encyclopaedia*, turned up the Gazetteer section and hunted frantically. You could probably judge by the size of the population if it was big enough to have a cottage hospital. Certainly there was no Windrush Hill listed, but she had an idea that that would be the name of the sheep station, not the district. She looked up Otago; that was the county or province or whatever they called them there.

Cecile had said it was the Scots part of New Zealand . . . where they out-Scot the Scots every time, she'd added laughingly. Her finger paused on the page. It didn't say much. Otago was in the South Island, it was mountainous, afforested, rich in gold. Farming, sheep, fruit. The capital was Dunedin, and the area approximately twenty-five thousand miles ... all of which told her absolutely nothing. There would be many towns in an area that size!

Forests? Hadn't Cecile spoken of huge timber lorries?

Hadn't she said laughingly, "Even the locals referred to it as Siberia!"

Dunedin, She looked up Dunedin. It was named after the old name of Edinburgh, there was wool and dairy produce, and the population was over one hundred thousand. That meant hospitals. If she could get to Dunedin she'd be within distant reach of the children, and nobody could prevent her going to New Zealand and she would see them periodically somehow.

What would be the quickest way? If she applied to go as an emigrant it would take time, oh, so much time. She would have to apply to go there on a working holiday, then perhaps apply to be allowed to stay. Would she be given a permit? She had an idea you had to be able to show you had sufficient money to keep yourself.

There wouldn't be a lot over by the time she paid her fare. She certainly wouldn't be able to travel on the ship with the children. When you wanted to travel the cheapest way possible you got no priorities.

No deck cabins for her ... it would have to be the lowest deck possible, an inside cabin, not even a porthole. What did that matter, anyway, as long as she could show enough money to get that permit? She'd manage it somehow. It would take a little of the sting of misery off, for the children, if she could tell them she would follow them to New Zealand, when she had to break it to them that their grandfather was their legal guardian and had decreed they must go out to him.

The phone rang.

It would! She'd have liked time to herself before being called out again. To consider things, to decide, even to set preliminaries in train, to contact a shipping office in Glasgow, perhaps. She hoped whatever call it meant wouldn't take time, like a middy case, for instance. Most babies took their time coming into the world.

It wasn't a case. It was a long-distance call, from Newcastle-upon-Tyne of all places. But she knew no one there. For some reason Janet's heartbeats quickened, her pulses throbbed. What now?

It was a personal call, the operator said. "Mr. Morgan Mackay is calling Miss Janet MacGregor."

Mackay! Thomas MacNee's nephew from New Zealand. Janet felt as if someone had whipped the legs from under her. She drew in a great gulp of air to steady herself, released it and said: "Janet MacGregor is speaking."

In the moment or two she had before they were connected she pulled herself together.

The enemy ... or at least the enemy's agent!

The voice was younger than she had expected. You could pick he was neither English nor Scots, but it sounded like a blend of both.

"My name, as you've probably been told, is Morgan Mackay. I've just had a letter from a firm of London solicitors. It was forwarded after me from the Continent —evidently they thought I was still there—so you've probably been expecting to hear from me earlier. I believe you've been looking after the MacNee triplets. I should have explained that their grandfather is my uncle and I help him run Windrush Hill.

"I don't know if you knew the children's mother and stepfather well—I suppose you must have done if you're in charge of their children—so do let me offer you my condolences on the loss of friends. Are you there, Miss MacGregor?"

Yes, Miss MacGregor was there, but she couldn't speak, her senses were whirling. *"If you knew the children's mother and stepfather well—I suppose you must have done -"* What on earth could he mean?

She said faintly, trying to gather her wits together, "Yes, I'm here, Mr. Mackay."

He continued: "How are the children? Are they terribly shocked?"

She said: "They're getting over it. It's five weeks since it happened, and children don't stay at crisis peak for long—praise be. And besides that, they've always been with me a lot. I—but -"

He cut in, "I know. And you've done a fine job looking after them like this. They were very fortunate to have you. I take it that Mr. and Mrs. Fremont were away often, painting—and left the children with you. Mrs. Grant said you were like a mother to them."

Mrs. Grant? How in the world did he know Mrs. Grant? But she must explain.

"Yes, the children were with me a lot, though their parents spent quite an amount of time here too—Louis loved painting in Scotland too, you see. Mr. Mackay, just what have you been told?"

(She must tell him she was Louis's stepdaughter. He seemed to think—but he was rushing on again. Perhaps he felt this was costing him the earth. You did have that feeling on long-distance.)

"Well, you see this letter set out what I presume you've been told—my uncle wants the children sent out to him in New Zealand, naturally. I was travelling where the fancy took me. The lawyer thought I was still on the Continent, so he went ahead making arrangements because he knows I've a passage booked for March. He and my uncle between them have managed to get berths for the children and a nanny on the same ship, and the lawyer says he's advertising for someone to accompany them. That's essential—I could have managed three boys, but not a wee girl.

"He told me the children were with you and gave me your address—and when I realised you were a district nurse I thought—look, perhaps it's out of the question, I don't know. You may have ties of your own—family responsibilities I mean, but if you haven't, it would be a wonderful trip for you. You can imagine what's coming. You're a nurse, the children know you, and from what I'm told, love you dearly . . . how about it?"

He evidently took Janet's involuntary exclamation for one of wonder as to how he could possibly know all this and added: "As soon as I got the letter and digested it I did what we'd do in New Zealand if we wanted to make inquiries—I rang the Manse and asked the minister's wife about you."

Janet held her breath.

He swept on, "I hope you don't regard that as an impertinence, but I had to have something to work on. I said who I was and that I'd been told the triplets were in charge of the district nurse. That I was after someone to take them to New Zealand and would you be a suitable person for the job if I could persuade you to come."

He laughed. "Your ears must have been burning! You have a real advocate in your minister's wife, haven't you? She said it would be an ideal solution, and she didn't know of any reason why you couldn't go. She was sure they'd be able to get a relieving district nurse. She told me the kids had stayed with you so much when their parents were on the Continent painting that you'd had them more than their parents, and considering you were absolutely no relation to them, it was wonderful."

Janet's hand swept round behind her in an arc and grasped a chair-back. She tugged it towards her and sat down. She needed to.

"I—Mr. Mackay -" she began, then tried again. "Mr. Mackay, I'll have to -"

"I know, I know. You want time to think it over. I've taken your breath away, have I? I'm afraid we Kiwis are like that. We're up and off at the drop of a hat. We're so far from most places we have to be like that, to get anywhere, and we expect everyone else to be as travel-minded. I know you can't decide on the spur of the moment. In fact, I didn't expect you to, but thought I'd implant the

idea, then come to see you. I'm not far south of the Border. I've a rental car. I'll make my way up to you. But I'll be here tonight and tomorrow morning. I'll give you my address and phone number. I'm staying with people who are relatives of friends of ours in Tapanui. Perhaps you'd give me a ring tonight and let me know if you're even considering it."

Janet had to control a desire to laugh wildly. *Tapianui!* Well, she'd thought it had something to do with water!

She pulled herself together, managed: "It will certainly need thinking over, Mr. Mackay. I'll ring you tonight and tell you if I could possibly consider it. We could talk at more length then."

"That's so, and of course make it collect, Nurse."

"I beg—make it what? Oh, do you mean -?"

"I mean—er—reverse the charges. Is that what you say? Anyway, I'll pay for it. We may talk a fair while. Oh, by the way, I forgot to ask you about Cecile's stepdaughter. This Jeanne-Marie Fremont. Is she about? Or like her stepmother and father? Here today and gone tomorrow?"

Janet Mary MacGregor hesitated. Was she going to commit herself any further? Oh, if only she had time to think it out!

The voice at the other end said: "I've put you on the spot, have I? I suppose you're more or less a friend of hers and you don't like criticising her. You sound a decent body. And I suppose she's more thoughtless than unkind—like Cecile. No sense of responsibility whatever. Where is she, by the way?"

Janet took the irrevocable step. "In France," she said firmly.

"And left you with three children!"

Janet said lamely, "Well, I had this house—the Fremonts had only a sort of little shooting lodge they used when they were here." She tried to change the subject. "I mustn't keep you. We—we can discuss this tonight."

He laughed. "Watching the bawbees, eh? Even mine. I think, if you decide to come to New Zealand, that you and Thomas MacNee will have a lot in common. He admires thrift."

Well, that was one way of putting it, Janet thought. It might be more honest to say he was a tight-fisted old curmudgeon.

She bade Morgan Mackay goodbye and hung up. She sat on, staring into space. What had she done? If only she'd had time to think! It must have been her desperate longing to be with the children, to temper the wind to them, that had made her do it. She had deliberately lied. She ought to have put his misapprehension right at once. But she'd felt paralysed. A sort of impelling reluctance to close the door on an incredible chance of going with them.

She could see how the mix-up had occurred. Lawyers were rarely expansive. They were demons for economy of words, never chatty. He'd simply said the children were in the care of Miss Janet MacGregor, the Lochiemuir district nurse. Cecile had always called her Jeanne-Marie. The children, who were far more Scots than French, had kept it Janet. Cecile had had a certain amount of correspondence with old Thomas, had occasionally written him of their progress and sent him the odd photograph. Just enough to ensure he did not cut off financial aid. Actually, as far as they were concerned he'd been reasonably generous. Possibly with the idea

that when they were older and no longer the shocking nuisance of babies, Cecile had added, they might be useful to him.

When mentioning her remarriage to Louis, Cecile had probably said: "He has one daughter, Jeanne-Marie." If this Morgan Mackay had known he was speaking to that daughter, he certainly would not have made his suggestion. It was obvious they had made up their minds to sever all connections with the family. It just showed how hateful and unreliable these preconceived ideas could be. Jeanne-Marie Fremont sounded to this hidebound Kiwi like a flibberty-gibbet. Janet MacGregor sounded a no-nonsense person, a typical district nurse, and no doubt her voice, with its faintly Scottish burr, sounded sensible too.

But when he saw her . . . oh, dear! It would be just *the* same as when she first came here *and* nobody would believe she was old enough or capable enough for a district nurse. It had been a great drawback, with the old men in particular. They'd regarded her as a slip of a lassie who looked far too young to be even starting training in men's wards!

But she'd won them over by being really fierce and aggressive. Old Angus McMurtie had said just the other day: "When ye first came here I thought ye were just a puir shilpit creature, but in your ways ye're as much of a tartar as yon Nurse Elsteen ever was . . . times I reckon ye're worse! There's nae gainsaying ye when ye're set on that daft injecting and massaging."

Janet had a mad impulse, always, to say, when introduced to people: "I'm not as young as I look!"

She looked disparagingly down at herself. . . slight, finely boned, a little too thin. Even her colouring was ethereal rather than sturdy. All right if she had wanted to be the clinging vine type. She didn't

feel ethereal, she was sturdy in spirit. But golden hair and blue eyes made you look more like the fairy on top of the Christmas tree than a district nurse!

Well, it couldn't be helped. Tonight, when she spoke to Morgan Mackay again, she must sound more sensible than ever, so that in his mind he carried a firm impression of her fitness and responsibility. And another thing. He must be persuaded not to come here. He might take it into his head to see the minister's wife—in fact, anyone could give the show away and reveal her relationship to the children. Not a blood relationship, which was what Mrs. Grant had meant. With a shock Janet realised she had already made up her mind to take full advantage of the mistake. Otherwise, even if she succeeded in getting out to New Zealand, they would be months without her, getting accustomed to new surroundings, new schools, cut off from all they had ever known without even one familiar and loved person to buffer the blows. She would go out as their nanny, stay this month at Windrush Hill, say she'd fallen in love with the wretched country and get a job near them.

If she was found out she'd take the brunt of it, of course, but they couldn't kill her, only dismiss her. And they couldn't stop her staying in the country. Or could they? If they said she'd come in on false pretences, would it affect her application to stay? She'd risk it. The main thing was to get on *to* that ship with the children. A heaven-sent opportunity. She grinned to herself. She'd lied to bring it about . . . maybe the devil had more to do with it than heaven. Then she sobered, thinking wryly of her conscience which wasn't entirely easy.

But she'd tell the children nothing yet. They weren't worrying over their future. If they thought of it at all it would be just imagining they'd stay on here, with Hetty coming in at nights.

She got them settled in bed, their homework over, before she rang Newcastle. She'd made herself a strong cup of tea and had a couple of biscuits between getting them down and putting the call through. She wanted to sound calm and impressive, not shaky.

She'd even written down what she must say and *the* answers to any questions he might ask. She would say she was quite alone in the world, that she'd lost her parents long ago. True enough. She had always wanted to travel, so would take this opportunity. She would hint that she might even decide to settle there. And if possible she would try to avoid meeting him till they were on board ship. Once the anchor was cast off, they'd be right.

Things went quite well. Morgan Mackay was delighted, said he would wire the lawyers right away to cancel the advertisements, that he'd found a nurse to take it on. Janet was relieved he was wiring them, not writing or ringing. That meant that in all probability he wouldn't mention her name.

She said, with nothing in her voice to indicate that her heart was *going* like a trip-hammer, "Will you have to arrange much with the lawyer—I mean will he have to have my full name and so on, for the bookings?" She must know that much in case she was going to be bowled out any moment. If she was—well, she'd made a bid to get away with them, and she'd take a dressing-down, and would consider it had been worth trying.

"No, I'll make my own arrangements—simply forward your name to the shipping company and wire the solicitor 'Have found nurse, cancel advertisements.' Uncle Thomas did most of it through the New Zealand shipping agents—he knows them, of course. He's filled in the children's names and mentioned that a nurse will be travelling with them. I won't be seeing the solicitor—I'm not going back down south—or do you say *up* to London? We're

upside-down in New Zealand. He's booked a state-room with two cabins—one for you and Therese and one for the boys."

"Why a state-room?" she queried.

"Oh, Thomas MacNee likes to do things the grand way, and anyway in his letter to me—enclosed from the solicitor—he says he'd like them to keep up their lessons on the way. Would you be able to manage that? If not, we won't worry."

"I can manage it. I'll get some set lessons from their teacher. Mr. Mackay, I wouldn't dream of asking you to come right up here—I'm sure I can arrange everything here—and keep in touch with you by phone and letter. We could just meet on board. Where is it sailing from?"

"Glasgow."

Janet heaved a sigh of relief. She wanted to keep him away from that London solicitor. Much better than Tilbury or Southampton.

He went on: "But I'll come to see you. I'm used to distances, and in any case, I'm coming up your way to see where my forebears came from."

"Oh, you're one of the Argyll Mackays?"

"No . . . Sutherland. Further on still, so you're not taking me out of my way."

Janet's brain worked at speed. "When will you be leaving Newcastle?"

He told her, outlining the places he wanted to see en route.

"Then that will get you here Thursday, and I'd planned to have the children in Oban that day—it's my day off. You'd find better accommodation there than here—our inn's not up to much."

"I'll probably think it's pretty good. You should see some of our country pubs—though come to think of it, we've got one of the best examples of a New Zealand country pub in Tapanui that you could imagine."

Janet said hastily, "Oh, you wouldn't like this one, and I really must spend all day in Oban shopping for the children, couldn't we meet there?"

He gave in, they arranged a time and place. He asked her had she told the children yet, was told no, she had thought she should wait till she'd rung him again.

"I approve that. My word, I'm lucky to get you. You sound just like my mother. If the youngsters had known they were to travel with strangers, they might have been very apprehensive, poor little beggars. As it is, knowing you are going they'll probably regard it as a great adventure and it will serve to take their minds off their loss. We'll give them as good a time as we possibly can, eh? Know if they're good sailors?"

"Yes, excellent. We're right on the coast here of course, and my—I mean their stepfather wasn't keen on air travel, so they often crossed the Channel."

He hadn't noticed her slip! Janet felt weak with relief. She heard Hetty coming, and was glad of the excuse to make some more tea.

She didn't mention anything to the children till the night before they went to Oban. She knew if she had done so earlier they wouldn't be able to resist telling their schoolmates. They were delighted to have a day off, and since someone was relieving Janet and had often done so, they asked no questions.

But just before they went to bed she sat down with them at the table as they had their buns and milk.

"Listen, children . . . you know, don't you, that your mother always got money for you from your grandfather in New Zealand?"

They nodded, eyes intent on her over their tilted glasses. Connal put his glass down quickly and said: "It will still come, won't it, Janet?"

She wanted to take it as lightly as possible. She said, "Oh, there's no question of stopping the money, Connal. Only naturally, as you are his only grandchildren, he thinks the most sensible thing is for us to go out there to him, on the big sheep station."

Us. What a relief to be able to say it! How terrible if she had had to say: "He wants you. Not me."

Therese had a rim of milk round her lips. Janet wanted to hug her, she looked so little, so sweet. Her tawny hair hung in elf-locks to her shoulders, her eyes were red-brown and she had quite heavy, adult-looking eyebrows. Her eyes sparkled. "Janet, do you mean go on a ship—a big liner—across the world, to New Zealand?"

"Not necessarily," said Tommy. "You could fly. Only takes a few days then."

"We're going by ship," said Janet firmly. The MacNee children were past-masters at picking up a conversation and carrying it

right away from its main purpose. If she wasn't careful, they'd be into a stramashing any moment on the fors and againsts of modern travel, makes of planes and trips to the moon! "Now, I think you'd better let me give it to you straight, and you can ask all your questions afterwards. Agreed?"

Three heads nodded solemnly.

She had to plunge. No good wrapping anything up. "Now, you know your mother quarrelled with your father's father? Not seriously, I think they just couldn't understand each other. She was French and used to an easy existence, and things were too different. Then she got three babies all at once—a lovely thing to happen to parents, but even one baby takes a bit ol *getting* used to and makes a lot of work. She got very homesick for France, where her people always had help in the house, and your father took her home, thinking that once she had seen her people again she might settle back in New Zealand. Well, you know what happened. It was very sad. Your father was taken ill and died. Naturally, your mother couldn't face going back, so your grandfather made her an allowance, and later on she married your stepfather.

"Now, we mustn't blame either your mother or your grandfather. Naturally, your grandfather thought your mother to blame—not for his death but for taking him away, and though he kept up his responsibilities financially he wanted nothing to do with her, except the occasional acknowledgement of the money, your school reports and the odd snapshot. Sometimes people get difficult when they're deeply hurt."

Therese nodded sagely. "Like hedgehogs, all prickles."

"Exactly. Well, you must try to understand this. He wanted you to himself. He didn't want me. I'm no relation of his. No, wait,

Connal—I told you I *was* going. I *am* going. He wrote me through his London lawyer and said his nephew was in Britain and would make arrangements for you to go to New Zealand with him and he was to engage someone to take care of you on the way over."

She hurried on. Therese's lip was beginning to quiver, Connal had gone red and Thomas white.

"You see, I think he's got the idea that I mightn't be very suitable and as old men are apt to be pig—I mean stubborn, he -"

"You mean pig-headed," said Connal.

"I mean stubborn," continued Janet. "As they are apt to be stubborn and don't give up their ideas easily, I knew I had no chance of persuading him to let me come. I made up my mind I'd follow in another ship and get a job near by, but berths are hard to get and it might have taken months. I was desperate. Then his nephew rang. It was the oddest thing. He thought I was just looking after you. He doesn't know I'm Louis's stepdaughter. I think he imagines I'm at least forty. You see, it seems as if your mother always—naturally—referred to me as her stepdaughter, Jeanne-Marie. They assumed Louis was my own father, therefore I was Jeanne-Marie Fremont, a saucy French baggage! Doesn't sound a bit like Janet MacGregor, district nurse, does it?"

Their eyes were like saucers now, each chin sunk in a pair of hands.

"I can only suppose that the solicitor, as solicitors do, knowing he had a lot of explaining to do, simply said: 'They are in the care of Miss Janet MacGregor, care of the district nurse's cottage, Lochiemuir.' He thinks Jeanne-Marie is a callous beggar who skipped out leaving you to the district nurse.

"Now he knew the solicitor was advertising for a nanny to go out on the ship and stay a month, and thought it a wonderful idea if the district nurse—me—went too! Even if he's a Kiwi he's evidently got a lot of the canny Scot in him, because he rang Mrs. Grant at the Manse. He must have plunged in and asked was I a suitable person to take to New Zealand. Mrs. Grant mustn't have tumbled to the fact that he didn't know I was your stepsister, but she recommended me wholeheartedly, feeling, no doubt, that it was an ideal solution but hadn't said so in so many words.

"So I'm letting this Morgan Mackay go on thinking I'm no relation, merely a kind-hearted body who has taken you in. He'll probably think I'm too young when he sees me, but by then he'll have everything fixed up, and I'll try to appear more staid than I am. Once we get away from here I don't think there's much chance of him finding out who I am, and it will give me the chance to be with you. And if it should come out, months later, they'll know me well enough by then to realise I'm no French baggage. But it means one thing. Tessie, you're not to breathe a word to anybody ... if you do, then it may mean you have to go to New Zealand by yourselves. I'm determined to be on this ship with you, even if I have perjured my immortal soul."

Therese's mobile brows flew up and she collapsed into delighted laughter. "This is going to be fun! A real conspiracy. It's just like that book I got for Christmas called 'The Lost Cousin Returns'—the wrong one turned up first, a horrible girl, then the right one. It was terrific."

Janet sighed. "Well, in this case don't forget *I'm* the wrong girl. *I'm* the deceiver, and I hate doing it, but I'm desperate. And, Tessie, whatever happens, don't get carried away by the romance of it and give the show away!"

"As if I would, Janet! I'll be as silent as the tomb. And if anything transpires, I'll probably be able to save the situation because I'm much quicker on the uptake than the boys."

The boys howled. Connal said, choking, "Losh, haven't you got an idea of yourself! If anyone gives it away it will be you . . . you'll trip over yourself, let go the bag and the cat will be out—you and your big words!"

Janet brought them to order. "And that's why we're going to meet him in Oban, because I don't want him here in case he gets talking to any of the locals. I've told him our inn is no good, and all I can hope is Meg Cameron never gets to hear about it. In any case, we've got to go shopping in Oban. You'll all need summer things."

Tony looked puzzled. "But it will be winter when we get there. It's the southern hemisphere, Janet."

"Yes, but you need thin things for the tropics, and you're all shot up since last summer. We're going Panama, not Suez, so it won't be as long, but it will be pretty sticky just the same."

"Oh, how lovely! After all, we've seen the Mediterranean and even a bit of Egypt the year Louis was painting there, but Panama will be new."

Janet could still hear them talking when Hetty came and she went upstairs to hush them down. She wouldn't tell Hetty yet. Hetty was interested in New Zealand because she had a sister there who had married a Kiwi serviceman in 1942 and gone out in 1946.

On Thursday the relieving nurse came just before they caught their bus. She was retired now, but liked to add to her pension by a day here and there.

They had a glorious morning shopping. They were to meet Mr. Mackay at an hotel Janet had named and would have lunch there. The children were wildly excited at their purchases . . . denim shorts, new bathing-suits, thin shirts for the boys, sun-tops for Therese, adequate sun-hats, light sandals, the thinnest of cotton pyjamas.

Janet bought a few things for herself too. Not too much. She would be best to husband her own resources in case she was found out soon after arrival, and she had to show a respectable sum of money to the authorities to be allowed to stay. Never mind, don't cross your bridges before you get to them, Janet MacGregor. The thing is to accompany the children there, get them settled, then find a job near. After that, Thomas MacNee couldn't do a thing.

She bought an extra suitcase, but left it till she had the district nurse's car in Oban. She didn't want to advertise their departure yet, to anyone they might meet on the bus.

But in spite of her absorption, by the time they turned their steps towards the hotel she had butterflies, a thousand of them, in her stomach.

They came into the lobby, looked across at the lounge door, knowing this was the first test, and were intercepted by someone from the office.

His smiling gaze swept the children ... as always, easy to identify because of being triplets.

"Miss Janet MacGregor?"

"Yes?"

"There's a message from a Mr. Mackay. He's been delayed and can't get here at all today. He saw an accident happen, stopped to give assistance and has to make a statement. He sends his apologies and will ring you tonight and see you tomorrow."

So much for keeping him out of Lochiemuir!

CHAPTER TWO

THE children were horribly disappointed, and Janet realised with deep unease that they were looking forward with diabolical amusement to meeting their kinsman from New Zealand all the more because of her deception. She wished passionately there had been no need for it. You tried to instil into children a real respect for truth and honesty and landed yourself in a mess like this.

Though the children were looking on it as only a way of circumventing a baddy. But she didn't want them to regard their grandfather as a baddy. He was just an old tyrant, stiff-necked with pride and prejudice probably; so whatever she, Janet, was going to suffer from that pest of a conscience of hers, it could not be helped. She just *couldn't* let the children go into a new life without her.

Janet gave them lunch at the hotel—she couldn't deprive them of that treat—did some more shopping and returned home.

Through all the children's chatter her mind was busy. The longer Morgan Mackay was here, the more dangerous the situation.

She was ready for him when he rang. He would be there tomorrow at lunch-time, he said.

Janet replied: "I've arranged for the relieving nurse to give me an extra day if I need her. As it's Saturday, the youngsters will be home from school and we'll have lunch here and then—if this suits you—we'll go for a picnic. It will give you a chance of seeing round this area, it's very lovely. You've a car, you said? Because the nurse will have mine, of course, and in any case, it's not to be used for jaunting. The reason for the picnic is that if I stay home someone would be bound to want attention when the reliever is at the other end of the district and I'd have to leave you." (And to

leave you alone with the children in danger of giving the show away would be unthinkable, her mind added.)

Morgan Mackay thought it a fine idea. "This accident and subsequent events have cut my time down, and I'd like to see as much of the countryside as possible."

Another hurdle taken.

Fortunately it was a bonnie day, with hills and valleys a-sparkle in frosty radiance. There was scarcely a hint of a cloud, and though there would be plenty of storms yet to come, this was the promise of early spring.

She wished she could have met Morgan Mackay in her uniform, neatly severe. Though even that didn't make her much older-looking, but its air of authority would have given her confidence. She wore a skirt of the MacGregor tartan in its reds and greens and a dark-green twin set with a string of pearls. It looked a no-nonsense garb. And she wore brogues. She looked, she knew, a little like Minnie Mouse in them, but at least they were plain and sensible.

The boys wore Harris tweed shorts and bulky jerseys, and Therese was in Black Watch trews and a scarlet sweater. They looked unbelievably clean and solemn.

Janet had the lunch all ready, the kind that was to impress her suitability as the children's guardian. Scotch broth, steaming hot, a saddle of mutton and red-currant jelly with it, mashed carrots and parsnips, roast potatoes, delicately browned. And apple pie. You were always safe serving apple pie to men. She had the percolator filled, but would ask him if he preferred tea. She'd heard they were

great tea-drinkers, Colonials, but perhaps by now they, too, had succumbed to drinking more coffee. She had made oat-cakes and girdle-scones.

They saw him get out of the rental car, take a quick look at the setting of the cottage. Janet hoped he approved its old-maidish neatness. He strode to the front door and rang the bell.

She told the children to stay where they were and went to the door. She flung it open and said, smiling nervously, "Good morning."

He looked down at her from a broad-shouldered height. "Is Miss Janet MacGregor in?"

Janet's chin lifted a little. "I'm Janet MacGregor," she said.

"What?" Hazel eyes stared, dark brows came down. "But—well, how different you sounded on the phone. I—I didn't expect anyone so—so young."

"I'm not young," said Janet tartly. "I couldn't be a district nurse if I were. I'm almost twenty-four." (Well, she'd had her twenty-third birthday last week.)

"Good lord! You look about sixteen."

Janet's voice sounded severe. "I don't *feel* sixteen. Not after the experience of life I've had. One does, nursing. I may look fragile, but I'm as tough as—as an old boot!"

The brown face crinkled up, softening the craggy look.

"I believe you might be." His voice held what she *thought* was mock respect and stifled laughter. "But I'd imagined someone at least thirty and sort of—er— well upholstered. An impressive

bosom and size eight shoes . . . not a slim slip of a girl. Your voice doesn't match the rest of you!"

Janet said firmly: "My voice matches my age, my maturity. If not my looks. Come away in, Mr. Mackay."

He was still smiling. "I'm afraid I was much too personal . . . even for a casual Kiwi. But you were such a surprise. I wasn't saying I didn't like what I saw, you know. I like it very much. It was merely that I didn't expect someone who looked as if a feather of a wind could blow her away."

"It would take some wind to blow me away, believe me." Janet squared her shoulders and tried to look as if she could resist a hurricane. She heard giggles from the living-room.

He chuckled. "Rash words. Wait till you get to Windrush Hill! It's built on a hilltop, and New Zealand is just a couple of—no, three— islands stuck out in the middle of the Pacific. Stewart Island in the Far South may be tiny, but it's too beautiful to be ignored. The winds blow down from the Equator and up from the South Pole and meet somewhere in West Otago, I reckon."

Janet said: "The triplets are dying to meet their new— what are you? An uncle? A cousin?"

"Well, I'm the son of Thomas MacNee's sister, so I'd be a cousin of their father's. I was about eighteen when last I saw their father. He was a good bit older, but we were great pals. A marvellous horseman. He taught me to ride."

Janet realised the children had stopped giggling. They'd like that. They couldn't remember their father.

She took him through. The children were a little wary, reserved in a way the MacNees rarely were. Poor lambs, this was an ordeal.

"Better just call me Morgan," he said.

They got interested in him, in spite of the initial stiffness. He set himself out to put them at their ease, talking of New Zealand, and particularly of West Otago.

"It's high above sea-level. Well, Tapanui is only five hundred feet above, but it's down in the basin of the hills; we're on the heights. So we get deep snow and heavy frosts, but very hot summers. There are forests on the hills, the Blue Mountains. And huge timber works. That's what Tapanui means ... on the great edge of the forest. Though some think the name could be a contraction of Te-Tapuwa-e-o-Uenuku . . . the footprints of the rainbow god. And certainly we get a lot of rainbows." He pulled a face. "Which means, of course, a lot of rain. But Scots people don't mind it."

Janet, laughing, said: "I was trying to remember the name of the nearest town before you rang. I knew it had something to do with water, so I looked up *Pears* and tried to find something in West Otago beginning with Brook or Spring. And it was Tap."

They all laughed and Morgan Mackay said: "It's due to bad *pakeha* pronunciation. *Pakeha* means white man. We shouldn't say Tap, we should say something more like Tah. So it is really Tah-pah-noo-ee."

Janet asked if he would like another helping of pie. He would, but added hurriedly, "A small helping—my first was enormous, but it's so delicious I can't resist another. If you can make pies like this you'd better stay in New Zealand. Our hotels are always after cooks."

He helped himself to cream and continued: "You may find it a bit remote, though we're nothing near as isolated as the high country stations—the real high country back in *the* Alps. Some of them have to ford rivers to gain access to their homesteads, but even so, our West Otago farms are distant from each other compared with here. I don't know how you'll take to it, Miss MacGregor, though it's a wonderful life for children. You're used, naturally, to visiting people all day long."

Before Janet could say anything Connal got in, "Oh, *Janet* will be all right. *She's* not one for hitting the high spots—but just imagine if it had been Jeanne-Marie coming with us!"

Janet's startled eyes met his. Connal switched his look hastily and innocently back to Morgan Mackay.

Therese chimed in. "Wouldn't it have been terrific! She'd have been scared out of her wits . . . can't you imagine it? Trembling at the sight of a cow, much less a bull! Longing for neon signs and footlights ..."

Tommy's voice: "And her heels! Mincing over the fields with a parasol to shade her complexion . . . clutching at her hair every time the wind whipped up. She'd say: '*Mais non, non* . . . thees is *too* crude a life. Me, I cannot live on the edge of nowhere!' "

Therese: "And her hats . . . however would she have packed her hats? Her oh, so French hats. Yards of tulle, Cousin Morgan, clusters of flower-petals . . . those huge cartwheels she used to wear to the races . . . I'm very dubshuss if she'd have got any shipping company to take them."

Tommy and Connal went into shrieks of laughter. "Dubshuss . . . dubshuss! Oh, hark at her!"

Janet, her alarm relieved by the laughter, said severely, "No good getting mad with the boys, Tessie, you were bound to use one big word too many some day. It's dubious you mean."

Therese turned scarlet with mortification and tears started to her eyes. "Then why is scrumptious scrumshuss?"

Morgan Mackay was laughing helplessly but in kindly fashion. He put out his hand and took Therese's. "Oh, Tessie, the quirks of the English language are beyond comprehension! I'm all in favour of reform, myself. What about dough and rough and bough and through? How many more can we think of?"

The MacNees were always happy to be diverted. Off they went. But Janet was most apprehensive. Those wretched children must have cooked this up the other night and just waited for an opportunity to put it into action. She must never leave them alone with this dark-avised stranger. They'd overplay their hand. If only she could get on that ship with no further meeting. She'd head them off like mad today anyway.

But it was Morgan Mackay who came back to the matter. "I take it then that Jeanne-Marie Fremont was not exactly a kindred spirit?"

He said it to Janet, but Connal got in first. "No, too, too Frenchy for anything!"

Janet rushed in. "Connal, that's a horrible thing to say! You are half-French yourself and you loved Louis. Just because Jeanne-Marie was"—she swallowed—"was a flibberty-gibbet, it isn't to say all French people are. Some of them are the salt of the earth. I won't have these sweeping statements. It's just as silly as saying that because old Tam Erskine is light-fingered all Scotsmen are thieves!"

She rose. "Now off you go, you three, into the garden. Mr. Mackay and I have things to discuss. We'll go for our picnic in half an hour."

Thomas said quickly: "Can't we help with the dishes?" (Monkey . . . they wanted to be in on the discussion!)

"No, thanks. You've helped enough for today." She had her back to their cousin and the look she bent on them was full of meaning. "I'll just put the dishes in the sink and do them tonight when Mr. Mackay is gone. He'll want to press on."

As soon as they slammed the door behind them Morgan Mackay said: "Dishes are rather sordid to come back to. Most Kiwis lend a hand in the kitchen. Let's wash them up and talk as we go."

Janet thought it a good idea. She'd rather not have to meet his eyes as they talked.

He picked up the tea-towel. "I take it that you didn't want to discuss Jeanne-Marie in front of the children. But they seem to have formed their own judgement just the same. Children are pretty good at summing-up. Or was it that stepchildren don't always get on and was she not too bad?"

Janet was hating this. "Oh, she wasn't bad, but a lightweight. No good at taking responsibility."

"She couldn't have been. It was absolutely heartless—haring off to France so soon after her father's death and not caring tuppence what happened to the children."

"She left them in my care," pointed out Janet.

"Yes, that showed sense. Still, people like that are pretty shrewd. She'd know that you'd stick to them through thick and thin. Thomas must have had a good idea what she was like. He had said to the lawyer he wanted no girl going out there to make her wicket good. Seemed to think she had an eye to the main chance, and he would prefer to bring up the children away from their earlier, possibly undesirable, influences." When Janet did not answer, he added: "I can't believe my incredible luck in getting you. I can see how attached you are to them and they to you . . . and how efficient you are." His eyes twinkled and he added, "In spite of looking like 'the lass with the delicate air'."

Janet said calmly: "Well, as long as you understand I'm not in the least delicate or frail—that I'm well used to managing the children—it will be fine. There, that's all, I've got the tea packed, so let's be off."

She was experiencing a mad desire to tell him all. That since he so approved of her, it would be all right. But no man liked being fooled. He would be furious. Not only that but he would think her even worse than the mythical Jeanne-Marie to tell such lies. No, she was committed to the deception now.

If she hadn't had so much on her conscience (and scared stiff of what the triplets might say) she would have enjoyed it. Never had the hills been so sharply etched against the sky, the tracery of the just-starting-to-leaf trees so exquisite, the countless colours of the rocks so noticeable, every contour, every silver gleam of loch and river so beautiful, so dear. Janet had seen quite a bit of the world on trips with Louis. They had been brief visits because her holidays had been short, but they had only added to her love for Scotland and her desire to strike roots. She didn't want to leave it,

to go across the world to a new, raw country. One that wouldn't welcome her if she had been entirely frank.

Looking at Morgan Mackay, despite his ease of manner and his charming way with the children, Janet decided she wouldn't like to cross him.

But he was fun with the children, leaping across the tiny, frothing burns from rock to rock, chasing them round birch and rowan, asking them endless questions, about the birds, the trees, the distant peaks, about breeds of sheep and cattle. The MacNees loved it. It bolstered their ego.

"Losh," said Thomas, "I'm glad you're going to live in the same house as us. It'll be fun. What's it like?"

Morgan Mackay described it. "I'm sorry I've not got my slides with me. I brought a lot to England to show some friends and left them in Newcastle for them to show Cumberland friends, who have visited New Zealand, when they go there next week. I do wish I'd had even a snapshot of your grandfather to show you."

Janet thought they'd meet him soon enough.

There was just one jarring note. She said, idly enough, at a moment when all three children were intent on watching a watersnail, "I remember Cecile once saying that Otago out-Scots Scotland. Is that right? That they still keep up the old customs even after more than a century?"

"They do. Old Thomas is a third-generation New Zealander. His grandfather arrived out on the *John Wickliffe*, the first ship to reach the new settlement, yet he retains a Scots accent slightly, and he was drum-major in the local pipe band."

"*He was?* He isn't now?"

Morgan Mackay grinned. "No. I fell heir to that position."

It was said before she thought: "And heir to other things too?"

He looked at her sharply: "Such as?"

"Well, heir to Windrush Hill, perhaps?"

He said slowly, jerking his head towards the burn, "Aren't they the heirs to Windrush Hill . . . now?"

"You mean that—till this happened and Mr. MacNee saw the chance of getting them back, he was more inclined to look on you as his heir?" She looked up at him and added quickly, "I'm just trying to find out for the children's sakes."

His tone was stiff. "Thomas certainly looked to me to carry on for him whenever he had to retire from active farming—though that won't be for long enough. He's as tough as a nut and lean as fiddle-strings. The sort to live for ages. And I've helped him at Windrush Hill ever since I was a farm cadet after a spell at an agricultural college. He wasn't to know the children would ever come back home."

Home. How strange. A home they couldn't remember. But it was true. To everyone but herself Windrush Hill would be home. She would be the alien.

Morgan Mackay looked at her very strangely. He said slowly, "I can only suppose that Jeanne-Marie—or Cecile—put some very odd ideas into your head. Do you think I resent those children? I'm very happy for my uncle's sake that his own grandsons will be with

him. It's a family affair and goodness knows Windrush Hill is big enough to satisfy us all."

All. But there were now *three* extra to share it. Would a man, used to thinking of himself as the heir—despite what he said—really be as glad to see closer relatives like the triplets come into their own? Janet's conscience stopped pricking her. She was completely justified in doing what she had done. The triplets needed her to guard them.

But the rest of the afternoon was quite pleasant, even if she would be more at ease when this dark stranger had gone north to see for himself where his clan kinsmen lived.

She knew a lightening of the heart when he said: "I took your advice and didn't book in at the Lochiemuir Arms. I'm going farther ahead to Killieluig."

They got down to details. He had the date of sailing for her, a list of things she'd need for the voyage and told her to see about their injections immediately, asked if there were many belongings she'd want brought out for the children.

"Just a few. They're down at the shooting lodge the Fremonts used to rent when here. Louis did a lot of painting hereabouts. There are a few of his pictures."

Morgan groaned. "Not modern impressionist stuff, I hope?"

Janet was gentle with her rebuff. She didn't want to put his back up again. "Louis Fremont was a noted painter—and not for eccentricity. He didn't go in for the stuff that won't last. He painted landscapes and portraits as they are, not as seen in a nightmare or needing interpretation. The children will be proud to own them in years to come."

"But doesn't this Jeanne-Marie want them? Isn't she sentimental at all? The more I hear of this girl the less I like her."

"She—she has some of his pictures. In France, at his relatives'."

"Oh, she's got relations on her father's side? Then we don't need to worry about her?"

"Oh, no, she's quite well provided for," said Janet hastily.

"Is she? But apparently this Louis took no financial responsibilities for his stepchildren?"

She had to say apologetically, "Well, there was Mr. MacNee's allowance. And I'm afraid he and Cecile lived up to their means. He had to travel. But Jeanne-Marie will be all right." She added: "You know, Thomas MacNee did say Jeanne-Marie was to have no further responsibility for the children. So she accepted that."

"Well, even so I'd have thought more of her if she had stayed with them till they left Scotland. She ought to have wanted to see to whom they were being entrusted for the trip out."

Janet changed the subject quickly. "About packing -"

"Send the bill to the solicitors. Get packers in, don't attempt to do it yourself. It must be done expertly where keepsakes, china and so on, are concerned. And get it well insured. You can take as much personal luggage as you like, but make sure you have all you need for the first few days in one case each. Get the injections done right away, in case there are reactions or they don't take. Though I guess I'm overstepping myself there— you'll know all about that."

"I'll call on my way back to see how things are going, then I'm afraid I'm off to Denmark on dairy business for my uncle. We've

branched out recently on cattle as well as sheep. Will you be able to get yourselves to Glasgow? Get down a day or two before, of course, book in at a good hotel. I'll join you the night before, and will settle for it all. I'd come up for you, but I've a fairly tight itinerary."

Janet said: "Oh, there's quite a bit of their allowance still available, and I'm not exactly penurious myself. I won't send the bill to the solicitors."

He smiled rather nicely. "Independent, eh? Okay."

"About that itinerary, Mr. Mackay, it's not necessary to call back, believe me. You said something about going up to Sutherland and Caithness. Don't you want to work your way down the other coast? Most tourists do."

"I would have liked to, yes. But you might need a bit of help or advice with something."

"I shan't really." Her eyes twinkled. "People always try to be protective with me, and I'm as much in need of protection as a man-eating tigress, Mr. Mackay."

He laughed back. "I'm beginning to believe you. I find you quite formidable, myself!" His look belied his words. "And we'd better drop this Mr. Mackay-Miss MacGregor business. We'll be living in the same house, and it never lasts in the country anyway. Naturally, as I'm their cousin-once-removed, the children will call me Morgan. Well, I'll get an airmail away to Uncle tonight to set all his fears at rest. I'll tell him I've got a redoubtable Miss Janet MacGregor to look after the children, a district nurse who had taken them to live with her.

"And I'll add that this Jeanne-Marie Fremont he's been worrying about hasn't got to be reckoned with as she's taken herself off to France. I think he was frightened she'd tack on too. After all, he can't be expected to provide a home for his daughter-in-law's stepdaughter too, though he'd make her an allowance rather than have her along."

Janet managed to say quietly, "To be quite fair to Jeanne-Marie, I don't think it ever entered her head."

"H'mm," he said drily and unbelievably. "I'll leave you an address in Suffolk—it's in Ipswich—and I'll ring you, anyway, to make sure everything's all right. When we get back to your cottage I'll write the details down."

Janet's relief at seeing him go was only equalled by the children's outspoken disappointment that they wouldn't see him again till their ship sailed.

Janet lost weight in that time, she was so apprehensive. Every time the phone rang at night, which was often, she' dreaded to hear Morgan Mackay's voice, in case it was to tell her he had found out that she was the children's stepsister. But when he did ring all went well.

She told him the name of the hotel she had booked, and was most relieved to hear he wasn't joining them there but staying a few miles out from Glasgow that last night.

"I'd have liked to have been with you—you'll feel strange and excited, and even though the kids will simply regard it as an adventure, I expect you'll have all sorts of regrets at severing your ties with Scotland, even if not for ever. However, I promised to look these folk up if I had a chance, they're related to neighbours next door to us. If you can call it next door—you can't even see the

house. So I rang them from Edinburgh and they insist I stay the night and they'll bring me to the ship. We'll make a time to meet. We have to be on board by five, though she's not sailing till seven."

Another reprieve. And with strangers with them, there'd be no private talk till they were on board.

CHAPTER THREE

As soon as she saw the ship, the *Hakoakoa*, lying at the wharf, already astir with the bustle of a liner about to put to sea, Janet knew a thrill of the pulses that was sheer pleasure.

She turned to find Morgan Mackay and his friends, elderly folk, coming towards them.

Mrs. Abbot was a sweet-faced woman and it had given her a real thrill to have first-hand information of the cousin she'd not seen for forty years. Morgan's visit had given them great pleasure.

"I've almost persuaded them to come out to see us, Janet," he said. "There's no reason why they shouldn't now. Mr. Abbot has retired. After all, it's what a great many New Zealanders do at that age. Always the draw of going Home. You'd love it. Come for twelve months if you can. It's always best to be four seasons in a country. Some come just for the summer."

"What does Hakoakoa mean, Morgan?" asked Connal suddenly.

"The Sea Hawk. I guess you're dying to be on board. Come on, Mr. and Mrs. Abbot can come on too."

The Abbots looked at the ship with interest in which was kindling a desire to sail in her too.

Janet realised that Thomas MacNee had indeed spared no expense. The cabins and state-room were more roomy than she had expected. Morgan Mackay's cabin was on the same deck, but not nearly so well appointed, and he was sharing it with a father and two sons.

Janet was glad of the presence of the Abbots. It bridged the awkward time between boarding and sailing. She would know peace of mind only when they were out in the Atlantic.

Tension grew when the time came for all visitors to go ashore. Passengers with no one to see them off were looking impatient, tourists returning home had a happy contented look as if they had realised the dream of their lives and were now glad to be reaching towards the fairest lodestar of all . . . home. Those who were leaving Scotland's shores for ever to make a new life in a country as far away as it was possible to be were in tears or the dread of tears. And all the children were wildly excited.

Streamers shimmered out in gay colours, already some snapping, reminders of how frail a link now held them to the land. Music, sentimental and nostalgic, was being played, all the gay, meaningless banter of shipside farewells floating down and up. Somewhere pipes played a farewell.

Suddenly they were moving. Janet knew a lessening of tension that almost undermined her. She felt an uncontrollable shaking that started in her midriff. Morgan Mackay's fingers found hers, pressed them. "It's always a poignant moment, Janet, don't hold the tears back. And remember that in your case it isn't for ever." Then he added, strangely, looking down at her, "Or is it?"

Janet gulped, said: "It might be, if I fall in love with New Zealand."

The novelty of it all for the next few days seemed to keep all dangerous topics at bay. It had been fairly cold, with winds that seemed to come down from the North Pole but were invigorating to walk against, warmly wrapped. Despite the reasonably calm seas, many chairs had been vacant and many places at table. The

MacNees and their cousin seemed the best of sailors. So was Janet. But she assisted a little with the seasick passengers.

Once these few days were over, the real fun of shipboard life would start. She admitted Morgan was good with the children, though occasionally she did wonder if his attitude towards them, since they were their grandfather's direct heirs, wasn't a little too good to be true. Wouldn't it have been more natural if he had shown a little resentment? Janet felt on guard on their behalf.

Outwardly she accepted it all, called him by his Christian name as he had asked, was thankful that children lived in the present and that none of them seemed inclined to hark back and expose them to the danger of having this masquerade discovered.

She had to be grateful to Morgan for the time he spent with the children. He even insisted that she retired to a deck-chair occasionally with a book while he took over their supervision. He spent quite a bit of time at the children's insistence in the state-room with them, during their lessons.

Janet realised that in a very unobtrusive way he was preparing them for the differences in the way of life in New Zealand. That was good. And he was instilling all sorts of local history and geography into them. That would help bring them up in knowledge, with the other children in their class.

"We're going to arrive bang in the middle of the May holidays, youngsters. Not a bad idea. It will give you a chance to explore Windrush Hill and absorb the farming procedure. After that school takes up for the winter term, a fairly short one, with holidays in August. Then spring, and lambing comes along, though we don't start as early as some. Too high up. School exams take place in November and the school year ends just before Christmas, when

you break up for six weeks, going back the first week in February. Into new classes then, of course. The school bus will take you in every day. School buses travel hundreds of miles all over New Zealand."

Gradually Janet got used to the idea that the children were quite safe, that she could leave them once they were asleep. At first she stayed in the state-room within call, but finally Morgan insisted she should join him on deck or in the lounge during the evenings.

They were into warmer latitudes now, and it was delightful to sit on the after-deck and watch films. Sometimes the children stayed up for the early sessions. But Morgan usually persuaded her to come up top again.

He said to her laughingly, as they were leaning on the rail, watching the water creaming back from the bow, "I'm glad you weren't the fortyish Miss MacGregor I'd imagined on the phone, Janet. I'm enjoying this return trip much more. Not that it wasn't exciting—we came through Suez—lots of ports of call, Singapore, Aden, Cairo, the Pyramids, Port Said, Naples and so on, but I had to be careful nobody mistook my intentions . . . one has to mix, but, oh dear, moonlight on the boat deck can be dangerous!"

Janet grinned at him. She was thoroughly at ease with him now. "You still ought to be careful, Morgan. *I* might get carried away with this moonlight—right now!"

The dark-avised face softened for a moment looking down on her. "I wonder. You've successfully brushed off any of the others with romantic ideas, Janet. You look such an innocent, yet you can take care of yourself so well. What is it? I can't believe you're lacking in romance, yet you certainly don't let it go to your head."

Janet was surprised at the warmth of pleasure she felt at the compliment. "Perhaps it's that I feel my position is a little different. I'm being paid for this—to look after the children. I'm not on a pleasure cruise."

He was surprised. "I think you're taking it too seriously. I'm sure even old Thomas wouldn't expect you to be on duty twenty-four hours a day, Janet."

A strand of her golden hair blew across his mouth. She put a hand up and removed it. He came nearer her. Janet turned, said lightly: "What's that? Did you hear something?" She looked behind her into the velvet darkness.

He chuckled. "Oh, Janet! You didn't hear a thing. I think you're stalling. I reckon you're afraid of the moonlight!"

She found she was trembling. She shook her head, said in a non-sense voice, "One hears so much about shipboard flirtations. I've decided to steer clear. At nineteen I'd have loved it."

Suddenly his arm was about her, and it felt like steel. She put out a protesting hand and it was caught in a vicelike grip. Then, most surprisingly, he hesitated. In the moonlight she saw the side of his mouth quirk up. "It's all right, Janet. I won't kiss you against your will. It isn't fair to a girl. But it's not just a flirtation. I don't want to say any more than that at this stage. You could say no if I rushed my fences. But. . . let's get to know each other a little. Like this . . .?"

His eyes held hers compellingly, willing her not to ask him to release her. She hesitated, and was lost.

He laughed, with a note of teasing male triumph in it. "I'll take that silence for assent," he said, and kissed her.

Janet was aware of so many emotions in that moment that she didn't know how long it lasted. It had been all that a first kiss should be, a giving and a taking. When he took his mouth from hers, he held her still, there against the rail, a peaceful content in their silence. He rested his head against the wheat-gold hair. She was conscious that he wanted to say all manner of things, that he was keeping his feelings tightly leashed.

Janet was suddenly vividly aware that so was she. She finally made herself withdraw a little. This wasn't the time to let your feelings run away with you. This was moonlight-on-the-boat-deck, remember! Gossamer stuff, stardust and tinsel. Not good, hard-wearing homespun at all. Not to be trusted . . . especially when you had a secret to keep.

He let her go, smiling to himself, slipped his hand beneath her arm, began to walk her along the deck.

Janet said: "I think I'll go down now."

He grinned. "No supper tonight?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Or is it that supper seems too mundane after a kiss like that?"

She was trying to appear to treat it lightly. "I'm never sure if kisses should be analysed," she said primly.

He gave a great shout of laughter. "Oh, Janet, Janet! All right, I won't tease. Good night. I'll have a last pipe up here."

By the time Janet reached her cabin she had not stopped trembling. She must keep her head. It was nothing more than the usual shipboard stuff. Morgan Mackay thought she was going back to

Scotland after settling the children in for a month—even if in an unguarded moment he had asked if she might stay. This was meant to be no more than a pleasant interlude, and his veiled reference to a deeper feeling probably just sprang up from the enchantment of a moment.

She found she was arguing with herself. But he had said, "It's not just a flirtation, Janet." Her common-sense self clamped down on that. She must be careful not to get swept off her feet. Better to have a mild flirtation with someone else, than with someone whose life was so closely bound up with the children's. It could make for a situation that would bristle with difficulties and embarrassments. She must let him see she thought nothing of it.

The ship forged on in calm seas through latitudes that steadily became hotter. A certain pulsing excitement in anticipation of the tropics made itself felt, the swimming pool became extremely popular. It was hard to think it was a pool, because even though it was so calm the steady movement of the ship lashed the water into waves. The children, all good swimmers, thought it great fun. Janet and Morgan always swam with them, loving it as much as they. But they were strict over sunbathing.

Many people weren't, and spoilt much of their dream trip with the very real agony of blistered shoulders and legs. They were warned often enough by the doctor and nursing staff who got weary of treating burns, but they had to experience it for themselves before they would take precautions. A pity to ruin what was, for some, the one long ocean voyage of their lives.

Janet had to take care because of her extremely fair skin, but Morgan turned only a deeper mahogany. He hadn't forced the pace after that first kiss. In fact, it was disarming, as if he were allowing an attachment to develop gradually.

It seemed as if they had been on the ship for ever, sailing across this glassy sea. Janet loved being able to wear sunsuits and flimsy frocks, to feel warm balmy breezes caressing her bare skin.

The children were amazingly angelic. They'd got so interested in shipboard life they'd forsaken their plot to stress the fact that one Jeanne-Marie had been left behind. Janet had read them a lecture before embarking.

They didn't object to lessons and were brutally frank in saying they preferred Morgan as teacher, since he told them so much about New Zealand. He did it quite well, not just imparting information but setting them tests on it.

Janet and Morgan were sitting on deck in a secluded corner on a dreamy night. There had been films, and now they were content to lie back and watch the night sky. There was no moon, but a myriad stars flashed and sparkled, seeming, as always at sea, much nearer than at home. They had a more golden quality, nothing of the frosty silver radiance of the north.

Morgan reached out suddenly and took her hand, leaned over her. "Great test of companionship, isn't it, Janet . . . silence? We've shared quite a few silences, haven't we?"

Janet said to herself: "Be careful, my girl!" Then to Morgan, "I think one naturally falls silent looking over the rail or lying back like this on a drowsy tropical night. One can't talk all the time."

He chuckled, leaning much closer above her. "Janet, that's stalling! You're trying to sound a cool little customer, and I don't believe you are. You've got all the grit and determination in the world and a spirit about twice as big as your body . . . the indomitable Miss MacGregor! Although you're friendly enough, you're still keeping me at arms' length when we're alone —why?"

Janet kept her voice unconcerned, light. "I've been warned about shipboard romances. You said as much yourself, remember?"

Morgan said: "Don't turn your head away like that, Janet. I like people to look at me when I'm talking to them."

"You're too near," she said protestingly.

"Near. Not *too* near."

She caught her breath.

He added: "You know perfectly well I said that about the trip over. About people—girls—I didn't care a darn about. Shipboard romances are insubstantial things because so temporary. But our lives are already intermingled."

"But I'm only staying a month. I'm going back to Scotland."

"I'm going to make you change your mind about that. Besides, I can't see you leaving the children alone in a land where they know no one. You're very closely attached to them, aren't you? Almost as if you'd been their stepsister instead of this French baggage, Jeanne-Marie." He was smiling as he said it. "She didn't care a brass farthing for them."

Janet, alarmed, said: "I had them a lot. And they— and I—are such kindred spirits. We're four of a kind."

"Exactly. You must stay with them. You'll need to."

"You mean that three children, all the same age, take a deal of looking after?"

"That too, but mostly for their own sakes. Because they need someone—a woman—to love and to understand them. And, in this case, to link up their old life with their new. And while no doubt Elvira will look after their physical well-being excellently, I can't see her giving them love and understanding."

Janet, a tight knot in her throat, said: "That's exactly what I was afraid of. I didn't like asking you because I thought that what Cecile said of her might have been personal antagonism, that they were simply incompatible. Is she formidable?"

"Extremely so. She's ruled the roost at Windrush Hill ever since my aunt died. She makes a fetish of housekeeping. You never see a mat awry, a speck of dust. It's admirable, in some ways, but not in the least relaxing. I have a bedroom and sun-porch of my own and often retreat there. That was why I made up my mind you should come with them, not just a strange nanny who would deliver her charges, stay the month and go back."

Janet's voice was bleak. "But isn't that just what Thomas MacNee will want me to do?"

"He might have had you been someone merely hired for the voyage, but I'm confident he'll feel about you as I do."

"You mean he might ask me to stay on?"

"Just that. In fact, I've already written him glowing reports of you and suggested just that."

Janet turned to him. He was still holding her hand. "Morgan, I can't thank you enough. It's extraordinarily kind of you."

He put back his head and roared. "*Kind*, she says! Oh, Janet, Janet, it's not altogether disinterested. Don't you realise I want to keep you in New Zealand?"

Instinctively they both got to their feet. He pulled her to him, let go her hand to put both arms round her. Janet felt her pulses racing. As he kissed her she could feel his heart thudding against her.

His voice was amused. "I can't post that letter till we get to Curasao—though it won't be long, we're almost into the Caribbean. But Thomas will read between the lines—my feelings, I mean."

Janet said: "You're going too fast for me, Morgan. I've got to think things out—no, please don't kiss me again, I can't think when you're kissing me."

"Oh, Janet, who wants to think? Better things to do."

Warning bells were jangling for her. He wasn't really going too fast for her—she wanted nothing more than to yield, but what was it going to involve? What would he think when he found out? When he realised that she had deceived him. She must play for time. Once they were beyond Panama, out in the Pacific, she couldn't be put ashore and flown home.

Would he react that way? She couldn't tell. She didn't know him enough. How terrible it would be to cast all inhibitions to the winds and to grasp happiness, only to have it wrenched from you. He needed to get to know her more, so that once in the Pacific she could confess, more sure then of understanding, because surely as they grew to understand each other, he would realise her motives were the highest. But if she gave in now he might—quite justifiably—think she had done so solely with the idea of disarming him.

He sensed her withdrawal, respected it. Said, lifting her chin and looking down on her with a tenderness that almost destroyed her resolve, "All right, I'll be patient. I'll let you see New Zealand first, our way of life, everything. It's not fair to ask you to make a decision like this when you've known me so short a time."

Her gratitude made her starry-eyed. He groaned: "But don't look at me like that or I'll rush my fences!"

Janet moved through the next few days in a dream. It was so delightful to be teetering on the brink of falling in love. Or was it the brink? One night, in the state-room, just before going to bed, she met her mirrored eyes and realised she was over the edge . . . submerged, in fact . . . and knew an intolerable longing to have done with this deceit, to be past Panama, beyond the point of no return, and to get the whole thing off her conscience.

She would never forget the day in Willemstad, the quays lined with narrow gabled houses in seventeenth-century Dutch style, all colours, pinks, greens, blues, yellows, and roofed with pale-red tiles; the silky-soft air, the glittering sunlight, the lively chatter and bright splashes, of colour in dress and merchandise; the exotic cactus flowers, the temples and palms.

The crowds were buying eagerly, watches, cameras, Thermos flasks, portable radios . . . Morgan bought her some Dutch tiles, some Delft Blue ware, a piece of Danish porcelain, native straw novelties for the children.

They had lusciously coloured ices, sugar sweets, delighting in the difference of it all. A day to remember.

Then, tired but happy, back to the ship that seemed like home now.

"And to our mail," said Morgan. "I ought to have read mine, I know, but there was such a whacking pile of it I couldn't bear to waste the time. Anyway, we'll reach Cristobal in two days' time. Plenty of time to answer it."

Janet had no foreboding. Only a happy sense of tranquillity.

She got the children washed and changed and they ran along to the playroom, eager to meet their friends and exchange news of the day. Janet sank down into an easy chair in the state-room, pleasantly cool with the air-conditioning, and relaxed.

There was a tap on the door, she called out "come in" and Morgan entered.

At the look on his face she got up. "What is it, Morgan? Have you had bad news? Is it old Thomas? Or your mother?"

She put out a hand and caught his. He shook it off. What could be the -

"Not Thomas. Not my mother. Not bad news in the sense of sad news. Just *bad*. About *you* . . . *Jeanne-Marie!*"

Janet closed her eyes as against a physical blow.

She opened them to find him shaking a letter under her nose.

"Before I left Glasgow I dropped a line to the solicitors. Said I knew that at one time they had been in touch with Cecile's stepdaughter, that I understood from Miss Janet MacGregor that she had gone to France and that though I was disgusted that she had not stayed in Lochiemuir to meet me to assure herself that the children would be in the care of some responsible person, I felt I would like her to know that Miss Janet MacGregor was escorting

them to New Zealand and staying a month or two till they settled in."

His nostrils were white, the lines in his cheeks deeply scored. He looked at her with utter scorn.

"*Miss Janet MacGregor!*" he repeated.

"And now . . . and now I get a letter from him saying he can't understand my letter. That he had written to me saying Miss Janet Mary MacGregor, district nurse of Lochiemuir, was looking after the children and that he had assumed I knew she *was* the stepsister. Can you give me one good reason for this deception, Jeanne-Marie?"

Janet took in a deep breath. She must pick her words with care, she must convince him that the sole reason for her masquerade was that she could not bear, the children to be sent to the other side of the world with no one they knew to love and to care for them. Surely he would understand.

But she had hesitated too long.

He answered for her, savagely. "Of course you can't! So don't think up any. *I'll* supply the answer for you. My uncle was dead right, he said he didn't want any relation of Cecile's going out there to make her wicket good ... it seems he summed you up pretty well. I expect there was more basis for his reasoning than he told me. You laid your plans well, didn't you? You look like a wide-eyed innocent child—but the moment I phoned you, you took advantage of the fact that I thought Cecile's stepdaughter a Fremont. *How* you must have laughed up your sleeve!

"And everything has played into your hands since, even my falling for you—pah!—moonlight on the boat-deck, and what I thought

was a sweet companionship between you, me and the triplets. I strongly suspect you're an old hand at this pleasant dalliance business . . . you didn't make the mistake of falling into my hands like a ripe plum, did you? Oh, no, you played hard to get. Yielding a little, then retreating a little. And me, poor fool that I am, deciding not to rush you!"

Janet, till now numbed beneath the torrent of his anger, came to life. "That's not true, Morgan. Why should I?"

He stared at her disbelievingly. "Why on earth should you? Good heavens, don't go on trying to pull the wool over my eyes, girl. I've seen through you. The signs were there had I but noticed them, right from the day we first met when you -asked if I was the heir to Windrush Hill. I did wonder faintly at the time. There seemed to be *something* behind it.

"I suppose that the idea is that as old Thomas is pretty well-off, you couldn't bear the thought of the triplets going out there to everything that was coming their way. You wanted to cash in on it too. Thought you would have a month at Windrush Hill to twist my uncle round your little finger, to convince him you were necessary to the welfare of the children, to share in the prosperity that is Windrush Hill.

"Then you found a surer bet. A dead cert. Me! I was obviously attracted. The heir—you hoped—to Windrush Hill! When you asked me that, although it made me uncomfortable for a moment, as if you thought I resented the children, I thought it was for their sakes you were anxious. But now I know. I expect you thought you'd land at Wellington with a ring. Going to give in somewhere between Cristobal and Balboa, were you? Well, it's all over now, Jeanne-Marie!"

Janet was holding herself very straight, her hands clenched at her sides, her blue eyes like chips of glacier ice, and for once she looked older than her years.

"Mr. Mackay! Suppose I tell you my sole reason for not telling you I was the triplets' stepsister was out of love for them? Suppose I tell you I couldn't bear to have them taken to the Antipodes without someone of their own to love and protect them? Suppose I say that this deception was absolutely distasteful to me, but I was determined to be with them and it seemed an incredible piece of luck—your not knowing who I was? That I decided to suffer the pangs of conscience rather than let them go alone? Suppose I tried to get you to understand that I even told myself it served Thomas MacNee right for his pre-conceived ideas of me—that I dreaded the thought of the children being tyrannised over, misunderstood, lonely and miserable? Suppose I told you all that . . . what then?"

"What then, Jeanne-Marie? Why, I wouldn't believe you, of course!"

She said in a tone of deadly calm, "You prefer to think I was setting my cap at you? Good heavens, how vain can a man get? I wouldn't consider linking my life with a man capable of thinking such a thing. You ought to be grateful I didn't just snap you up. I'm doubly grateful myself now that I *am* here with the bairns. If they're all like you at Windrush Hill I'll be tempted to believe all Cecile said about the family is correct. I always felt that there would have been faults on both sides. I don't now. Like nephew like uncle, I suppose! Arrogant, unjust, disbelieving!"

"Of course I don't believe you! Who *would* believe such a horrible little liar? Even putting the children up to blackening the mythical Jeanne-Marie's character so that the noble one of Nurse

MacGregor should stand out in bold contrast! *That* I find the most despicable of all."

He turned, still white to the lips, strode to the door.

"Wait!" cried Janet.

He swung round impatiently. "Why should I wait? To listen to more lies ... as you think them up?"

Her lips were a straight line, compressed to keep them from trembling. "Not to tell you any more lies, Mr. Mackay, simply to ask what you intend doing . . . about me?"

"What do you mean? Do you mean am I writing to Thomas to tell him? Yes. He's got to know. So has that solicitor. Pretty fool I'll look."

"I mean, will you—will you put me off at Balboa? Send me back?"

He stood with his back against the door, arms folded, considering it—and her.

"That's something I can't decide on the spur of the moment. I'll think it out. But you're to say nothing to the children. Nothing to put them against me. No more lies. Do you hear?"

"I hear." Her lips were so stiff she could only just frame the words.

He looked at her with utter despising in his dark face. "When the children hear the game is up, they'll hear it from *me!*"

He went out, shutting the door in so controlled a manner it was somehow more intimidating than if he had slammed it.

Janet walked across to the porthole, her knees like jelly, looked out on the jade-green waters, laced with foam, and saw birds, their wings gleaming silver against the sun, soaring and swooping . . . they were as close to land as that. If only they had been weeks away, his fury might have spent itself, he might have—finally—consented to listen to her. She didn't doubt that she would be put ashore at Balboa. It was a nightmare thought.

CHAPTER FOUR

JANET never knew how she got through the next hour or two. For the first time she loathed shipboard life. Till now it had enthralled her. You couldn't get away from people. You had to appear ordinary. You couldn't cry and appear with swollen lids. You had to do things exactly as you had done them all the way; sit beside a man who hated and despised you, keep up a barrage of small talk as a defence against curiosity, preserve for the children an illusion that all was well.

Morgan Mackay acted the same. She had been almost sure he would. He was a proud man, with that almost haughty bearing that was natural to the Scots race—a race that had never known a feudal system. She thought he wasn't finding it in the least difficult, carrying off an awkward situation.

He waited upon her as punctiliously as before, continued to call her Janet, though sensitively she could hear the echo of his sarcastic "Jeanne-Marie" in his voice every time he did. He laughed and joked with the children, and with the other family at their table, the Lornes, including her in it all in a manner that would deceive everyone else. But Janet knew the vast difference. She knew now, with an aching sense of loss, how much had lain beneath the ordinary give and take of conversation between them ever since they had come on board . . . how gradually they had been falling in love. It had been there, unrecognised, in every time their eyes had met, sharing amusement over Therese's big words, Connal's quicksilver reactions, Thomas's stolidity and big-brother attitude. She realised how often their fingers had met, how quick Morgan had been to help her with a hand under her elbow, how sweet had been those rare moments alone, side by side in their deck-chairs, with their books, Morgan every now and then reading out a paragraph that amused or pleased him. The way, pacing the

deck or leaning with elbows on the teak rail, when the children had been in bed, they had explored each other's minds, discussed politics in Britain and New Zealand, religion, astronomy, the differences of life in each hemisphere, films, poetry, the other passengers . . . farming and nursing experiences too, filling up the gaps in their knowledge of each other.

It wouldn't have hurt so much now had they not been so kindred. Janet knew bitterness. She'd purposely steered clear of any emotional attachments when training, wanting to have a year or two at her career first before falling in love; she had thought first love might have been all the sweeter for waiting, that she would have learned discrimination . . . and she'd fallen in love with a man who wasn't prepared to listen to any explanation of her deceit of him, who had made up his mind that her reasons for it would be the worst possible.

It took them nearly two days to get to Cristobal, the most joyless two days of her life.

They dropped anchor at eleven that night. The whole ship seemed restless. For the passengers it was the anticipation of more shopping, of the novelty of going through the Canal, of seeing strange, exotic sights. The crew were restless too, but for a different reason. From the Captain down they wouldn't be really happy till they were through into the Pacific and the ship was their own again.

Janet had her own cause of restlessness, an uneasiness that finally became intolerable. The children had been asleep for some time. Tomorrow would be all bustle and excitement; other travellers who had gone through Panama before had said so. There would be no opportunity for conversation . . . uninterrupted. Janet knew

suddenly that she would have to know tonight what Morgan intended to do.

He was still up on deck, she knew. Most of the adult passengers were. Janet felt sticky and apprehensive and unsure of herself.

She told herself that it was partly physical, that heat made you feel that way and at least you could do something about that.

She showered quickly, slid into a coral silk frock that was sleeveless and had a wide, low neckline and slipped her bare feet into white sandals that were hardly more than thongs on rope soles.

She picked up her hairbrush, dipped it under the cold tap, and brushed her hair back vigorously. She didn't bother putting on the white necklace and bracelet she usually wore with this. She wasn't aiming to look decorative, only cool and in command of herself.

There was a knock at the state-room door. Janet caught her lower lip between her teeth. Oh, surely it wouldn't be Mrs. Lorne wanting her to come up to see the lights or the moon or something! She'd have to make an excuse, say she was going to bed . . . which would be rather ridiculous as half an hour ago they had seen her in a wilted blue linen. And they might see her later, going in search of Morgan.

What would she say? She opened the door.

It was Morgan himself, looking purposeful.

There was a glint, bright and piercing, in the hazel-green eyes.

Unconsciously Janet squared her shoulders, lifted her chin.

His lips were a thin, straight line. "I want you to come up top. Time we had a talk. And don't say it's too late, because it's our only opportunity and I don't care how late it is."

Janet's voice was crisp and unafraid . . . she wouldn't have him even guess what feelings she concealed. "Actually, you've timed this extremely well. I was coming in search of you. You're not the only one who wants a showdown. I know that from now till Panama will be all excitement. Let's go."

He stood back from her and she brushed past him. As the faint fragrance of apple-blossom perfume reached his nostrils, his lips tightened again, but Janet didn't see it. She went ahead of him, not quickly, not slowly, but maddeningly deliberately.

He'd picked his place, took her up on to the boat-deck, allowing her to walk by herself, though he was close behind.

"Round by that lifeboat," he said.

They came up against the chain, deep in the shadows.

"Here," said Morgan. He stood with his back to the way they had come, his height shutting off Janet's view of it. He put up his hand on the edge of the lifeboat, resting it on the tarpaulin. Janet felt shut in, overpowered. She took a hasty step back.

His lip curled. There was no mirth in that smile. "Don't be nervous, Jeanne-Marie. I'm not going to manhandle you—however much I might feel like it."

Her voice was completely calm. It surprised even Janet herself.

"I'm not in the slightest bit nervous. Only curious. I stepped back because you're so tall I'll get a crick in my neck. Now, what I want to know is what you intend doing?"

He said grimly: "I brought you here to have *my* say!"

"Ordinary courtesy—in which, strange to say, you have not been lacking these past two days—allows ladies first privilege. I must know what my future is. I realise, of course, that you've probably already written your letter to Mr. MacNee—but is it your intention to put me ashore at Balboa—and force me to fly home?"

"That was my first thought. Then I felt sorry for the sake of the triplets. Though I could probably have arranged for some kind-hearted woman among the passengers to take care of Therese, and I could manage the boys myself, I realised it would cause endless gossip and conjecture and I'd hardly appreciate everyone knowing."

"You mean it would have made you look a fool?"

"I mean it would have been extremely nasty for the children. So I decided we would continue as we were till we reach -New Zealand. I would have to tell my uncle, of course, something I'd not relish doing as he would take it hard knowing his grandchildren were capable of such duplicity, and I would see to it that as soon as they were settled you would return to Scotland."

He paused, his hand still resting on the tarpaulin, one toe beating out an impatient tattoo, his brow creased in thought as if he had not yet arrived at a final decision.

Janet felt filled up with regret. She'd thought that if ever it were discovered, she, and she alone, would bear the brunt. Perhaps she had allowed her sentiment to override her common sense, to hope

desperately that it would remain a secret. At the time nothing seemed to matter save that she could not let the children go out to New Zealand alone. If only they had not tried to boost up her pretence! They must seem like little schemers now. Yet she had had to tell them this man did not know she was their stepsister. . . .

She realised she'd been staring past his shoulder at the lights of Cristobal and forced her gaze back. If only she could convince him that her motives had been solely for the children's welfare, he might—his face was set like granite! He had made up his mind what to do . . . then what was it?

She said: "Tell me -"

But at that moment he said: "But I have decided now that since *you* have used *me* for your own ends—to say nothing of using Thomas MacNee's money and generous gesture—I'll make *you* serve *my* ends!"

She looked up at him with bewilderment. "Serve your ends . . . how?"

You didn't associate indecision and hesitation with this black-browed New Zealander, but it was an appreciable time before he spoke and when he did, Janet didn't take it in.

"It will suit me very well to continue the rest of the voyage as an engaged man. No one on the ship would be in the least surprised if we announced our engagement. So in return for my silence I'll destroy the letter I've written my uncle—if you will let it appear as if we are engaged, I'll undertake to say nothing whatever to my uncle. It can last a few weeks after our arrival. Then you will find you do not, after all, like New Zealand. You will break the engagement and go back."

Janet felt suffocated. She couldn't breathe. Her stress must have turned her brain. She couldn't possibly have heard right.

Then as she realised she had, she turned and walked on away from him, past the lifeboat, to where the rail began again. She stood looking out unseeingly.

He followed her swiftly, even, she thought, menacingly.

She breathed in deeply, turned to face him, back to the rail. Instantly, as if he feared flight, he placed one hand each side of her on the rail, and crooked one knee to bring his eyes nearer her level, leaning over her.

"It's no use running away, Jeanne-Marie, you've got to make a decision and make it right now."

"I'm not running away from it. It's just that I think you must be stark, staring mad. I wanted time to think —not to consider it but to try to imagine why on earth you would propose this!"

"Oh, I can tell you that. I knew I'd have to. Not that I exactly like talking about my affairs to a girl of your type, but I can't see anything else for it."

"Then let me hear it."

He shrugged. "It so happens that neighbours of ours are coming on board at Panama. Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Raymine. They were married less than a year ago and have been on a world tour. They've been through Canada and the United States, coming down through Central America. It—it so happens that Dallas's name and

mine were coupled together back home. I'd prefer to meet them again sporting a fiancée of my own—that's all."

Janet moistened her lips. "This—this seems incredible to me. I could understand a woman behaving like this. We have our pride. A girl who had been jilted might easily want to flaunt an engagement ring in her ex-fiancé's face, but I didn't know men had that kind of pitiable pride. Least of all you."

She could have bitten back that "least of all you". She really would rather he thought she could think anything bad of him, but it was out and couldn't be recalled.

He looked at her rather savagely. "Good heavens, how women's minds work! It's nothing of the kind. I'm hanged if I'll go into the details, but rather than you should think such a thing I'll explain that it's merely that I want Arnold to think all is over between Dallas and myself."

Janet felt unsteady for an undermining moment. To *think* all is over! What an unsavoury situation! She'd have nothing to do with it. She would not deceive a husband of less than a year—or any husband.

Morgan Mackay was watching her narrowly. "It's either that or I send that letter to my uncle. If you consent to this he need never know that you and the children conspired to deceive him."

Janet's temper flared. "You needn't try to make that sound a crime of the deepest dye when you're proposing a deception yourself!"

His lips tightened. "Probably not. I'm not concerned with the relative ethics of either. Will you, or won't you? If you won't, then I'll know perfectly well that what you attempted to get me to believe were your reasons for doing this, the welfare of the.

children, was nothing but a smoke-screen. If you aren't prepared to do this you don't really care tuppence about the children and you were just—as my uncle thought—trying to feather your own nest. Probably because you've an exaggerated idea of Colonial sheep-runs. It will most likely give you a terrific shock to learn how hard New Zealand women have to work—even where there's money and to spare."

"I think you're being quite ridiculous ... I haven't been brought up in luxury. I've kept myself since I was eighteen. A district nurse isn't exactly a lily-of-the-field!"

"Granted. But who's to know she doesn't hanker after a lily-of-the-field existence?"

"Well, since you won't believe me and since—earlier—you seemed to think I was casting an acquisitive eye on you—let me just say this: Had I been the most scheming female on earth I wouldn't have fancied *you* as a husband! I'd like a kind, understanding husband, not a self-righteous, overbearing, impossible prig—who, the minute it suits his particular book, is quite prepared to go in for full-scale deception himself. You ought to be careful, my dear Mr. Mackay . . . what's to stop someone as unscrupulous as myself from suing you later for breach of promise?"

There ... if it wasn't that every word she uttered was stabbing her, she'd have enjoyed insulting him! Serve him jolly well right. There was a limit to what one could take!

"Oh, but I had no intention of laying myself open to such a thing. I've made out an agreement saying that in return for a certain service I was able to render you, you agreed to stand in as my

fiancée for the duration of the voyage of the *Hakoako* and for your stay in New Zealand. I've got it ready for your signature."

Janet looked away from those angry, compelling eyes, to the dark sea, the stars, the lights of Cristobal, looked away and back and away again. He'd been as sure as that that she must agree.

She was tempted to throw the offer in his teeth, to walk away from him, strong in refusal, and to disembark at Balboa . . . but there were the children. Three of them, and just ten years old.

She looked into their future for them. In return for pretending she was engaged to Morgan Mackay she could accompany them to their home, meet Thomas MacNee without any hint of antagonism and distrust on his part, adjust the children to a new country, a new home, a new school, endure the bogus engagement for a few weeks, then break it and take a job in Tapanui or somewhere else near Windrush Hill. It would not be ideal, this Elvira sounded grim and old Thomas only slightly less so, but she could at least temper the wind for the shorn lambs.

She said bitterly: "You've got me in a cleft stick and well you know it. I'll do it. And hate you every moment of it."

He said sharply: "It won't work if you don't act well. No one must suspect it's anything but ideal."

She sighed. "That will be the severest test of all . . . but yes, as long as you remember that every time I smile at you and call you darling my tongue will be in my cheek!"

For some maddening reason he laughed. Janet stared, furious. He put his head back and chuckled, and she experienced an almost irresistible temptation to put her own head down and butt him in the midriff.

He said, gasping, "Try it . . . almost an impossible physical feat, I'd say!"

He sobered, grew still, then moved swiftly to her and seized her, bent his head.

Janet experiencing pure rage, turned her head sharply into his shoulder, said, through gritted teeth, "Don't you dare . . . don't you dare! This isn't the sort of bargain to be sealed with a kiss!"

He hissed into her ear . . . "Shut up! Someone's coming . . . they'll go away if they think we're a courting couple! Dammit, I don't *want* to kiss you."

Janet's voice was only a whisper, but it too carried such intensity of feeling she felt she was shouting. "Well, that's one thing—at least—we've got in common!"

The other couple backed away.

Janet said quickly: "We've said all we need to say, anyway. I hate this furtive lurking business. I'm going down."

"You can go down when you've signed this." He produced a ballpoint, brought his foot up to the lower rail, spread the paper on his knee, said: "Sign."

Janet signed it, thrust the ballpoint back at him and fled.

Down in the cabin she took out some lemonade, dropped a couple of ice-blocks in it from her wide-mouthed Thermos, drank it down thirstily, savagely wishing it had been brandy, peeled off her few garments and got into bed.

It wasn't even the sort of night you could pull the bedclothes over your head in a physical attempt at making a refuge for yourself. You could only lie, tossing in the sticky heat, waiting for a dawn you dreaded, when you were going to have to summon up every bit of acting ability you might possess to carry off a hateful situation.

If Hetty Sinclair were here she'd say sagely: "O, what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to deceive!" -'

A wave of homesickness, deadly and undermining, rolled over her. Oh, for that other world with kindly Hetty Sinclair in it . . . for the homely village folk, depending on her, trusting her . . . the commonplace familiar round, the clouds above the valley, the lark in the sky, the sheep baa-ing on the moorland, the rush and foam of the burns in spate from the hills . . . the utter felicity of being able to sleep at nights. Cold sometimes, yes, but you could always rise and put another blanket on.

Janet tossed back the sheet, decided two minutes later she could not sleep without something on her shoulders, tugged it up again. When, finally, she fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion, it was only an hour before the sounds of fierce activity above-decks awakened her.

The children were horribly full of energy. No wonder, they'd had a full quota of sleep. Janet told herself she must not be snappy with them. If only, if only she could run away from it all for twenty-four hours to refresh herself.

Wasn't it Samuel Johnson who had said: "Being in a ship is like being in jail with the chance of being drowned"? That was how she felt. She was very little refreshed after her shower, slid open her wardrobe door, looking in on a blue frock with sudden distaste.

Morgan —three days ago, in blissful ignorance of her deception— had told her she ought to wear blue always.

She pulled out a thin white dacron frock, sleeveless, with a square neck and buttoned all its length with large black buttons. It had shoulder epaulettes and through one of them was slotted a filmy square of black georgette that could be used as a head-scarf if it were windy later.

The children were in the thinnest of shorts and shirts, Therese's pale green, and she had a green ribbon tying back her pony-tail. "You'll just have to keep hats on today, children, I don't want sunstroke. And you can't be relied upon to stay under the awnings."

As they went along to the dining-room Janet could feel her heart thudding against her ribs. It was going to be an ordeal meeting Morgan, pretending they were closely attached, knowing that when they got to Balboa he was going to buy her a ring ... a symbol only of a tawdry pact.

The dining-room was full already. Morgan was seated, with the Lornes, but hadn't started his breakfast. He rose, smiled, held out his hands, clasped Janet's briefly and put them into their chairs. Then he had something laughing to say, because even with the temperature as high as this, Therese demanded her porridge.

The boys and Janet were having papaya which the Lornes, who were Australians, called pawpaw. They liked it chilled, with passion-fruit squeezed over it, the black pips enhancing the golden-yellow fruit flesh, and sprinkled with caster sugar.

"I like it well enough as an extra," announced Therese, "or as a pudding—but porridge gives you a foundation for the day."

Morgan laughed. "I'm with you there—and you'll find your grandfather will strongly approve. He's never forgone his oatmeal."

Janet thought it must be a particularly tasteless papaya—she might have been eating suet pudding.

Their ship joined the queue of ships to go through the Canal, the decks became congested with burly, happy-go-lucky Negroes and United States Security Police.

The men passengers had a wonderful time explaining the engineering feats of the locks, the filling, the lowering, what this was for and what that was for to all the women . . . with whom very little registered, though most were tactful enough to ooh and aah over it but were more interested in the scenery.

Janet thought she ought to be glad of the fact that this was so different in its hustle and bustle and ever-changing background from the usual shipboard days that had slipped past like perfectly graded pearls on a string. She hadn't realised how complicated the system was, how different from Suez which she had seen so often in films.

Here were the wider expanses of the lakes, the strange feeling of knowing they were once valleys, drowned now for man's convenience, that down below them were cliffs and ravines and river-beds where wild life and human life had lived out their existences, that those magic islands had once been mountaintops. Could it possibly have been more beautiful than this?

The children were enchanted to see pelicans, occasionally an alligator. Sometimes they went right down in a dark trough of slimy green walls, then miraculously the ship would rise towards the daylight.

They would look at mountain ranges, so different from the mountains of Scotland. These were thick with tropical bush where brightly coloured birds could be seen, so beautiful to look at, so raucous of voice. There were exotic flowers on the shore and, on the fringe of the jungle, clusters of European bungalows.

Janet wondered how much she would remember of it. Her mind was still so busy with the implications of last night's interview, miserably going over and over what she had said and what he had said, that this lush beauty, strangeness and activity scarcely impinged upon her consciousness.

But she had stopped yearning for the happiness of a week ago when she had been in that delightful enchantment of first falling in love. She needn't now torture herself with the knowledge that she had met her true mate only to have him disillusioned about her ... to think that his hurt had been the deeper because he had loved her. Oh, no. Now she realised that it had all been a game of his . . . that from the time he'd found out that Janet MacGregor, district nurse, was a young and not unattractive woman, he'd thought she could act as a smoke-screen to confuse the issue for Arnold Raymine.

She wondered what sort of people the Raymines could be. One thing she knew. She was not going to connive at deceiving Arnold Raymine other than appearing to be Morgan's fiancée. She would not cover up for any clandestine meetings.

They were due in Balboa at six-thirty. Dinner was being put forward so that the passengers could go ashore. Janet made a bid to stay on board.

"It will be an exciting morning for them tomorrow. They're worn out now with the heat. I'll get them down reasonably early and stay with them."

Morgan looked at her indignantly. "As far as the children are concerned it would be downright cruel. Talk about frustrating! This may be the one chance in their lives to see Balboa. And even if they're tired now, night comes down suddenly in the tropics, and with the darkness, a certain cooler atmosphere. The Lornes are taking their children, anyway."

Janet said wearily, "All right. I just thought it was less time to spend in each other's uncongenial company."

"We managed all right before. Nothing is outwardly altered. I suppose we're civilised enough not to be at each other's throats all the time. We must not allow the triplets to sense an atmosphere. It's no time since those three game kids lost their mother."

Janet almost boiled over again. She didn't need beetle-browed Morgan Mackay to remind her of that. Everything she'd let herself in for was for the children's sakes!

"Very well, then. If you can stand my company I daresay I can stand yours. I knew we'd have to be together tomorrow morning since you're insisting on this ridiculous ring—we could have just let it be understood we were buying a ring in New Zealand."

"I want no doubts. I want to be able to introduce you to Arnold Raymine as my fiancée. Complete with ring."

He paused and added: "And since we're supposed to be in love we might also be supposed to have discussed what sort of ring. Diamonds, I suppose? In a dainty little setting?"

"I don't care for dainty little rings." Janet brought up her right hand on which sat a large cameo. "I may look fragile, but my ideas are big."

"I know," he agreed offensively.

"I did *not* mean I had big ambitions. You *want* to believe that. I've always been content with very little. I mean I have no petty ideas. And it's ridiculous to think of diamonds. These sort of places sell a great deal of costume jewellery, naturally. Tourist shops do. You can get something quite cheap."

"That *would* be convincing, wouldn't it? The Raymines wouldn't expect *my* fiancée to have a trumpery ring."

Janet sighed. "No, they wouldn't. And because of that it would be easy to deceive them. After all, a duchess could get away with a ring from Woolworth's!"

They measured glances. Morgan said: "That's over to me, and since I'll get my money back on a reasonably decent stone, that's what we'll buy." His lip curled. "I won't give it to you at the end as a memento. We'll make it a sapphire." His eyes, hazel-green and unreadable, looked into her deep blue ones. He added: "Be a good idea if you got the children to shower and change now ready for dinner and we'll go ashore immediately after."

Janet couldn't help it. "How you must be enjoying this . . . bossing everyone. A dictator type. I can't think how you existed before we came on the scene for you to crack your whip over!"

He looked at her mockingly. "And you *said* you weren't petty."

Janet turned on her heel and left him, but as she walked away she knew that her blush reached even the back of her neck.

It was much easier with the children. Their excited chatter bridged all gaps. Morgan engaged a car to drive them round. They decided to leave Old Panama till next morning—the mosquitoes there were most vicious at night, they were told—but the blend of the old and the new as the two-hour drive took them round Balboa and through Ancon to Panama fascinated them.

When they paid off the driver they had extremely large and satisfying banana splits and walked round the shops. Janet, against her will, was glad of Morgan's company. This seemed in some ways a lawless place. Perhaps it was only strange, but to see armed police was so different from British bobbies.

She thought that probably the business places never shut down, especially when tourist ships were in. Morgan was generous with the children, buying them souvenirs that would last, not trashy ones.

Suddenly he stopped, and said in the most natural tone, "We've got a surprise for you, Janet and myself. We've decided to get engaged. We're going into this shop right now to pick a ring. You can all come in."

Connal gave a delighted exclamation. "Jeepers! Hand over that pocket-knife, Tommy."

Tommy looked absolutely crestfallen, while Therese executed a little skip of pure delight.

Janet and Morgan stared. Morgan said, after a moment, "Good lord, have you been laying odds on it?" He stopped, said with genuine curiosity, "What made you think we wouldn't, Tommy?"

Tommy said: "Because Janet was—because Janet wasn't—because—well, just because." He was crimson.

Morgan said calmly, "You thought Janet wouldn't risk it because I didn't know she was really Jeanne-Marie?"

Tommy, looking mightily relieved, said, "Yes . . . but if you know now and don't mind, I suppose it's all right."

Morgan let no hint of reservation creep into his tone. "Yes, it's all right. Bit of a lark, wasn't it?"

Janet realised how desperately he must want everything to appear natural. He needed the children's cooperation too . . . though he must be longing to lecture them, the hypocrite!

Morgan added: "But we're not saying anything to your grandfather yet—we'll tell him later, when he's got used to Janet being around."

Therese, still skipping round, suddenly lifted her arms towards Morgan's neck and, laughing, he lifted her up. She flung her arms about him, kissed him, said: "Oh, how lovely. I do . . . er . . . felicitate you."

Even Janet laughed. She had a feeling this couldn't be happening. She couldn't, at the moment, even believe in the existence of Dallas and Arnold Raymine.

They turned into the shop. And what a shop! A glorious shop. Janet felt as if her mind was strait-jacketed. She couldn't think up any natural-sounding objections to any of these rings. But the prices!

It looked as if she just had to let Morgan have all his own way. What if it were costing him a pretty penny? It served him right. She had a bleak thought. The price he was prepared to pay was the measure of the love he knew for Dallas.

He chose a square-cut sapphire, surrounded by tiny diamonds, beautifully mounted, a heavy-looking ring. Nobody could have found fault with his smile, "This is exactly the sort you said you would like, isn't it, my darling?"

His eyes met hers. Perhaps they'd take the look in them for embarrassment at the public endearment. She admired it on her finger, said, "It's exactly the ring I've always dreamed of," and the tremor in her voice didn't matter.

Morgan said laughingly, "It's not often you sell an engagement ring with three children in the party, I daresay?"

"No . . . eet ees usually to two people onlee. You are on one of the sheeps? Going to New Zealand?"

"Yes, and these are my small cousins and their nurse."

The jeweller clasped his pudgy hands together. "A ... *a* sheepboard romance?" His eyes surveyed the children. "But you must have privacy, yes, to put eet on.

No privacy on board sheep. My room here . . . my private room . . . eet is at your disposal. The children they will be all right with me. I show them the musical boxes. Hundreds of musical boxes. Come?"

He whisked them towards a door, opened it, ushered them in, beaming, and shut the door.

Janet's face was set when Morgan looked at it. She said, holding out her hand, "Give it to me."

"Don't be silly. Let's do the thing properly. We'd better get used to acting normally, even when there are no people around. You can't just turn it on and off like a tap."

"I can," said Janet mulishly. "I can be quite mechanical about it."

He took her hand, brought it up against his chest, separated the fingers a little and slipped it on.

Janet said in an expressionless voice, "That's just sheer masculine perversity and it makes a mockery of things that are usually sacred. I could have prevented you, but it's too undignified by far to struggle." She turned briskly to the door.

He got there before her. He took hold of the handle, said, "You're disappointing that quaint little jeweller. He's a born romantic. He'd expect us to be longer than this."

Janet came close to him, said softly but effectively, "I've had all I can take of your unadulterated company at the moment, Mr. Morgan Mackay. And I couldn't care less about disappointing any sentimental notions that little man has."

She saw a spark shoot into the hazel-green eyes, took a step back, but too late. He pinioned her hands to her sides, laughed and kissed her, holding her in a grip like a vice.

"Never heard the motto of the Mackays, my girl? It's 'With a strong hand'. And that's what you need, by heaven!"

Her eyes, blazingly blue, met his. "I've never been an admirer of brute force, myself. It doesn't mean a thing."

Her hand found the door-knob, turned it and out she went, her colour flaming, which of course was what they all expected.

The children had lost interest in the ring in what the jeweller had given them—a small music-box each. He must have been a family man, firm in having no favourites, for they were identical.

"No battling thees-a-way," he beamed.

The ring felt as heavy as lead on Janet's hand. She had to control a desire to finger it. She'd rather appear unaware.

It was a relief to see the ship, brilliantly lit. It would be a greater relief, Janet thought, to see it moored at Wellington. To have this hateful fortnight over, to have the first meeting with the Raymines behind her—and all the consequent shipboard ones too, fraught as they would be with strong emotion. She hoped desperately no complications would occur.

There was a shout behind them as they were about to board. They all swung round. Janet knew in an instant. This would be Dallas and Arnold. She hardly saw Arnold for the first dazzled moment, for Dallas took all the attention. She was everything Janet knew she was not . . . sophisticated, mature-looking, confident and poised, with the confidence and poise that comes from wealth-enhanced beauty . . . red-gold hair, auburn brows, delicately winged, red-brown eyes, high cheekbones, an exquisitely curved mouth with a faint hint of hardness . . . she wore a shot-silk gown that swung with every movement in tiny pleats, and a mink stole. She had drop ear-rings—diamonds undoubtedly—and a subtle fragrance emanated.

"But, darling, how wonderful to see you!" She held out two hands to Morgan, clinging.

Perhaps she called everyone darling, but -

She swung round and looked at her husband. "Arnold, my sweet, isn't it just too wonderful to meet someone from home like this? I suppose it does mean, Morgan, does it, that you're on this ship? I had an idea you would be going back about this time, but I didn't dream it would be on the very ship we booked our return on. Now it *will* be a lovely voyage. So much nicer than having to pal up with people one's not really interested in.

"And these will be the children. Your cousins . . . fancy! Netta Milburn wrote to us at Las Vegas and told us. And, of course," turning to Janet, "this will be their nurse. What a wonderful opportunity for travel, for you. Nurses do get around these days, don't they?"

Morgan's eyes met those red-brown ones fairly and squarely. "Janet is a nurse, yes. But also my fiancée. Miss Janet MacGregor. Can't you imagine how pleased Uncle Thomas will be with a name like that? How are you, Arnold? It's grand to see you. You've certainly acquired a tan."

Dallas Raymine drew in her cheeks till her cheekbones showed whitely through the skin. Then she let the breath go, achieved a light laugh, and said, "Morgan, you utter surprise packet! Well now, I'd have thought you'd have been the last one to have succumbed to moonlight on the boat-deck! Well, one never knows."

Morgan shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint you, Dallas. Not moonlight on the boat-deck, but a late winter picnic in a glen in Argyllshire. That's when it happened. But it's taken till now—and lots of moonlight—to persuade my cautious Janet it was the real thing."

Janet noted that Arnold Raymine's congratulations were very warm. As well they might be. Morgan was a strange, hard man. He would let his love suffer a shock like that till he could tell her it was all pretence.

Arnold was at least fifteen years older than his wife. Janet liked him at sight. He was not a striking figure of a man, shorter than Morgan and entirely without his aggressiveness. A man you would trust.

Mercifully, Morgan made it short. He said the children were now dead-beat and they must get them to bed. Arnold said they had decided on a walk after they had visited a night-club for the earlier part of the evening, just to look at the ship that would be their home for the next two weeks.

As Morgan said good night to them at the state-room door Janet said: "Do they live very near Windrush Hill —the Raymines?"

"Very near. Two farms away. Which could mean miles, of course, and *is* miles by road, but being hill country our boundaries are not square-ruled and their property runs uphill into ours. There's a short cut, for horses, through a gully."

Janet, climbing into bed, thought: Very near. Too near. She hoped she hadn't let herself in for something utterly unsavoury.

CHAPTER FIVE

MORGAN MACKAY certainly believed in doing the thing properly. After sailing-time their engagement was announced over the ship's loudspeaker; it appeared on the notice-board, it appeared in the ship's news-sheet, published daily, the *Sea Hawk Record*, with a clever little thumbnail sketch of them encircled by a sparkling ring.

Janet looked up from the cluster of people congratulating them and caught Dallas Raymine's eyes, narrowly glittering and mockingly amused, and hated the act she herself was putting on. It allied her with a woman she instinctively distrusted and disliked. She did not smile back.

She might have to enter into this with Morgan, but only in front of other people would she seem what they expected her to be; and not even by a look, an awareness of a shared secret, would she demean herself by finding any amusement in conspiring glances with Dallas.

No one knew how she felt when the Lornes presented her with a piece of Italian embroidery, exquisitely done, that they had been taking home with them, or when a group of parents, in thanks for the way Janet had sometimes looked after their children in the state-room, giving them a few precious hours freed from parental responsibility, clubbed together and bought a set of towels from the *Hakoakoa's* shop.

The children wanted Janet to open the parcel there and then, to watch her delight. The towels *had* to be marked "His" and "Hers". She would have been quite proud of the way she rose to the situation if Morgan hadn't been equally convincing in his sham enjoyment of it.

He even had the nerve to twinkle at Janet over their heads. When they were alone she said chokingly: "It makes one feel so bogus! They're so sweet."

He drawled, "But aren't you used to feeling bogus, my sweet? And if your Scots soul deplores the waste of money, especially a towel embroidered with 'His'— well, I suppose somebody will come along some day, Jeanne-Marie, and take you for the starry-eyed innocent you look. Put it in your glory-box, girl!"

Perhaps she hated it most of all the day Arnold Raymine joined them at the rail without his wife and said quietly: "I'd like to make you two an engagement present, but it will have to be when we reach home. We really didn't fancy anything in the ship shop. What's it to be, Morgan, a short engagement?"

Morgan's voice was as bland as cream. "As short as ever I can get the lady to make it, Arnold."

Arnold smiled down on Janet, touched her hand fleetingly, said, "I don't blame him, Janet. I'd want to make sure of you too, if I were Morgan." He turned to Morgan. "One thing, you've got a good start with a house half built, eh?"

Janet froze. A house half built! Why?

Had it been for Dallas?

But Arnold was a neighbour. Could he have been as off-hand as that if the house had been started with a bride—Dallas—in mind?

But then men were not given to letting things rankle. Maybe Morgan had estimated Arnold's reactions very well when he appeared with a fiancée.

Arnold's brown eyes were smiling down on Janet still. "It's a good job he held up the finishing touches when he went to Britain, Janet. You'll feel it's so much more your own if you can pick the interior decorations."

Janet gave it up.

She turned. Dallas was approaching. Sea-green linen, cut on lines that lifted it out of the simplicity class, suited her to perfection. Her hair, in the sunlight, was burnished copper. Her slanted eyes glinted mischievously.

"Hullo, everybody. How lovely that you can get so much time free from your charges, Janet. It's the sort of job most girls in your position would only dream of, wistfully, isn't it? Travel at someone else's expense, all sorts of opportunities."

Her tone was intended to mask the malice, but Janet was not deceived. She lifted cornflower blue, guileless eyes. "As a matter of fact, I'm not particularly travel-minded. I did too much of it when I was younger. Spain, all Scandinavia, France, Italy, Egypt. So much so that all I wanted to do was put down permanent roots. I never wanted to leave Scotland. But . . ." she smiled and the deep cleft of a dimple flashed in her cheek, "I'm glad now I didn't stay home." Her hand went fleetingly and caressingly to Morgan's arm, her gaze flickered up to his. It was very well done. It amazed even Janet herself. It meant, she realised ruefully, that Dallas Raymine irritated her so much she was likely to act with conviction.

Morgan laughed, managed to look down on her tenderly.

Arnold Raymine liked it. It made him feel safe. "You won't find our part of the world too different from Scotland, Janet. It's the place to put roots down in. Rolling green hills, glimpses of white-ridged mountains even in summer, forests and gullies, burns

tumbling down from the hills, farms and sheep-stations being handed down generation after generation in some cases."

Dallas yawned. "And Janet prefers all that to the Continent? Well, well. These men are besotted with West Otago, Janet. They only show one side of the coin. No night-clubs, no ballet, no opera, no plays. Only the most hicky entertainments. Even Dunedin, a hundred miles off, doesn't always get the visiting companies. The population is small, and it doesn't always pay to bring them. It's all right if, like Arnold, you can afford to pay a manager to run your place and take fairly frequent holidays over the Tasman to Australia . . . excuse me going into such detail . . . but if you just say Sydney or Melbourne most Europeans don't know where you mean. They're woefully ignorant about Down Under."

Morgan actually had a note of asperity in his tone. "Very few people these days, Dallas, and in any case Janet's not one of them. *She* doesn't think of New Zealand as some vague group of islands tacked on to Australia."

That rasp in his voice was a real one. He doesn't like her belittling West Otago, thought Janet. She was annoyed to find herself glad about that.

She found the palms of her hands were moist. How horrible this was, knowing Morgan and Dallas were in a conspiracy to deceive Arnold, pretending they hadn't known they were to travel back on the same ship!

Dallas laughed and shrugged. She had a most attractive laugh. She raised long pointed hands and lifted the hair back from her ears. "Morgan is a dyed-in-the-wool Kiwi, Janet. Be warned. At least Arnold isn't. He's a cosmopolitan. Wait till you see Tapanui, Janet. Stuck down in the middle of bleak hills . . . there's even a place

they call Siberia on the maps. They talk nothing but sheep and cattle, pig-hunting, timber . . . what happened at the sale-yards or the Women's Institute. Just occasionally we have the excitement of somebody getting lost in the bush.

"That's about the only time we hit the news. Or when we have a blizzard. And as for Balloch! A school, a garage, a manse and a church where there's only a service every other Sunday. It could be you ought to have seen it first, Janet. There's not even a general store. Morgan, you ought not to have let her tie herself up without having a look. You really will feel you're in the back of beyond. Especially when Windrush Hill lives up to its name."

Janet thought: "She's already preparing the way for me to give Morgan up. She's putting into one West Otago resident's mind . . . Arnold's . . . that I may not like living on the great edge of the forest.

There was some emotion in Morgan's voice that she could not understand. He sounded deeply moved. Or was it just that he thought Dallas might overplay her hand?

He said: "I've told Janet that Tapanui nestles beneath the Blue Mountains; that from Windrush Hill we can see sunset and sunrise on Whitecombs, turning the snow to rose and mother-of-pearl; that the rainbows arch from the sea to the forests, that Windrush Hill gazes night and day over some of the loveliest country in the world." There was eloquence in his voice.

Dallas capitulated. "It *is* lovely . . . safely behind glass. When the winds can't tear your hair-do to ruin."

"And the windows to the south-east are double ones," said Morgan. "Besides, *my* house is beautifully sheltered. I'm not challenging the elements as my forebears did."

Dallas seemed doubled up with laughter. "I'm not at all sure you haven't trapped Janet with rosy descriptions, playing down the things that would dismay any woman. After all, what woman wants to spend hours alone in Blue Murder Gully?"

She must have been disappointed in Janet's reaction.

Janet whipped round on Morgan. "Honest and truly? Do you really mean I can put 'Blue Murder Gully' as an address on my writing-paper to friends back home? How absolutely marvellous! And the triplets will love it. It sounds Wild West!"

The hazel-green eyes laughed back into hers. "You can, sweetheart, *after* we're married. Till then you'll have to content yourself with Windrush Hill. But the house-name—*my* house—is called Skyreach."

"How enchanting! Skyreach . . . Blue Murder Gully." Suddenly she realised she was believing she would live there, and her colour rose, clear and bright. She clapped her hands to her cheeks to cool them.

Arnold laughed indulgently. "Beats me why girls hate to blush. It's fascinating, Janet. So few do these days."

Janet, turning from the teasing men, caught a strange look in Dallas's eyes. It seemed almost incredible that those sultry red-brown eyes, so indicative, she was sure, of smouldering depths, could suddenly look icy-cold. But why? She knew Morgan didn't mean a word of it . . . that Janet MacGregor would never write Blue Murder Gully on her writing-paper. And surely, seeing she didn't love Arnold as a wife ought, she didn't mind him complimenting another girl?

Morgan slipped an arm round Janet's shoulders, said, laughing, "My small Janet looks so childish and is anything but. I call her my indomitable Jane. She was born out of her century. She ought to have followed her man over the wild prairies in a covered wagon. She's got what it takes. Janet, my love, I hate to disappoint you, but there's no wild history behind the naming of Blue Murder Gully. It has an echo that is the sweetest one you've ever heard, discovered for the first time in white history when my uncle's father's older brothers and sisters, newly out from Scotland, discovered it when playing.

"They were so fascinated they all screamed at the top of their voices and just about gave their parents, heart attacks, thinking they were being attacked by hostile Maoris ... in fact, they yelled blue murder! Therefore Blue Murder Gully has only family memories, and to me it's the loveliest place in the world."

The triplets suddenly appeared at their elbows, freed from a film session in the Under-Teens' rumpus-room.

"Blue Murder Gully, what a smashing name ... it beats Wild West names hollow, doesn't it?" That was Connal.

Tommy began running the names lovingly over his tongue. "I thought Morgan was stringing us on at first . . . Whisky Gully, Champagne Gully, Brandy Gully, Red Pine Spur, Grindstone Hut, Redshirt Clearing . . . gee, they are jolly good names!"

"Plus, of course," added Morgan laughing, "some honest-to-goodness Scots names like the Rankleburn and John o' Groats and—most unsuitably—Montecarlo Creek!"

Connal asked, "The creek must be near the sea ... is it?"

"No. We call inland streams creeks in New Zealand, not just tidal inlets."

"I just can't wait to get to New Zealand," said Therese, lifting her little concave face with its exquisite purity of line towards Morgan.

"Poor wee Therese," said Dallas silkily, "she thinks it's going to be all honey . . . and how could it be with a grim old tyrant like Mr. MacNee at Windrush Hill, to say nothing of Elvira! Pity her mother hadn't had the sense to call her Morag or Kirsty or something calculated to appeal to that lump of granite, instead of a name that will for ever remind him that she's partly French."

Morgan started to say something, but Arnold saved the situation. "Look, isn't that an albatross? See up against that cloud . . . not that I'm very good on sea-birds . . . probably it isn't. Did you ever hear of the sailor who was swept overboard in a stormy sea? The ship put about but couldn't pinpoint his position. He was almost done when an albatross attacked him. He reached up, grabbed the bird's legs and in spite of vicious slashing with its beak, managed to hang on long enough for them to locate him by the madly flapping wings . . . but he carried the scars to his dying day."

The triplets were never satisfied with the bare bones of a story. Arnold was engulfed immediately for times, dates, the season of the year, how cold it would be, what sea it happened in, what was the name of the ship, the sailor, where he had read it or was it someone he knew? What one didn't think of the other two did.

When the triplets were as near satisfied as they would ever be, Morgan neatly extracted them, and as he and Janet and the children walked away, he looked back and said to Janet, "Less than a year married to Dallas and already Arnold can hold his own. I thought he'd let her walk all over him. Dallas can twist most men

round her little finger and have them like it, but I don't think she'll commit another *faux pas* like that one." Janet didn't think it merely & *faux pas*. It was deliberate. How could a woman capable of such cold-blooded malice towards orphaned children exercise such fascination over men? Did they have no discrimination at all?

Why did Dallas display such animosity towards Janet? Morgan would have explained by now. Of course he would have. That first night out from Panama he had been missing some time, and Janet had noticed Arnold at the rail by himself for approximately the same period.

Janet decided she must be mad thinking Dallas was jealous of her. Yet it could be that if Dallas were madly in love with Morgan, she might resent the fact that to everyone else it appeared as if he were in love with Janet. For Dallas was undoubtedly the type to want all men's adulation and attentions. Perhaps she didn't think much of Morgan's scheme.

Yesterday she had quite patently tried to make Godfrey Palkington fetch and carry for her and had failed. Joy Palkington had said to Janet later, "I almost felt sorry for her, even tried to cover up Godfrey's rudeness. Though I won't be a hypocrite and pretend I didn't—deep down—enjoy the fact that he rebuffed her. But I so hate any unpleasantness. Honestly, I felt my blush reached the crown of my head! Godfrey got up and said with studied politeness, 'Your own husband's over there, Mrs. Raymine. I'll get him for you. After all, I came by ship instead of air especially to relax after hectic studies in England. I'm afraid I can't stand the pace.' He just returned to his book and became completely absorbed in it again. It wasn't put on."

Janet was too honest to be anything but sincere. "I'm glad he did." She had smiled at Joy, whom she already loved, "And I'm glad

you've got the sort of husband who isn't taken in by that type. Why should he be, anyway? You're twice as charming. It's nice to know some men look below the surface."

Joy looked at her. "Yes, Godfrey's your Morgan's type. Very discriminating. Good husband material. One-woman men. You and he make an ideal couple. And he's quite evidently more fond of Arnold than of his wife."

A pain that was almost physical had constricted Janet's throat. Morgan was a good actor, that was all. He loved Dallas. Even though she was married. Naturally, Joy thought Morgan slapped Dallas down now and again ... for how was Joy to know it was all pretence? That he and she had arranged to travel home together on this ship, unknown to Arnold? And never in her wildest dreams would Joy suspect her own engagement to Morgan was a sham to aid that deception. Janet smiled a little wryly to herself. One had to get some humour out of the situation.

It so happened that the other passengers, all unknowing, were foiling Morgan's plans for being with Dallas, it seemed. They were including Morgan and Janet in all the deck amusements and pairing them off quite inflexibly. It served both Morgan and Dallas right. Janet herself quite enjoyed outwitting them. Partly for Arnold's sake; mostly, she admitted, for her own.

It wasn't always successful. The night of Neptune's Ball, for instance. The day had been such fun. Possibly those of the passengers who were confirmed globetrotters were bored with it, but Janet (and, she thought, Morgan) had enjoyed it because the children had thought it positively hilarious.

But tonight was the grown-ups' night. Therese was starry-eyed over Janet's frock. It had been her one personal extravagance and,

she thought smilingly, Dallas wouldn't have considered it extravagant at all.

The only thing she now regretted was that it was all simplicity. A short frock, delightful to dance in through tropical heat, it was sky-blue lace and gauze with somewhere in the filmy folds a glint of sea-green. Janet had let her wheat-gold hair grow a little longer now and it turned up on her neck like hyacinth petals. Tonight she caught it up, twisted into a French knot, and to keep it secure fastened lengthwise in it a long hair-clasp of Therese's, a row of plastic daisies. Therese was enchanted to lend it to her.

Not only Therese admired it. Janet didn't lack partners apart from Morgan. But Dallas was breathtaking. She must have had that Neptune Ball in mind when she purchased that frock in the States. She looked like Iolanthe up from the depths of the water, a bewitching red-headed mermaid in glistening green-gold tinsel scales. It clung to her sinuously but fanned out into fullness from tiny shimmering pleats as she danced.

Yet Janet found herself enjoying the night. She hated herself for it, knowing that although she despised Morgan, there were moments in his arms, on this breathlessly beautiful tropic night, when she could forget everything except the irresistible magic of feeling her steps move with his, his hand holding her hand, his arm about her, his breath on her cheek.

Janet was finding out things about herself that she didn't know existed. She was examining herself mercilessly. What right had she to be so scathing about Morgan's feeling for Dallas . . . curling her lip over the fact that men could fall for someone who had beauty but no soul when she, knowing what she did about Morgan, could still find magic in his touch, his voice?

She'd always heard the tropics could have a strange effect . . . soft, silky air caressing one's skin, nights jewel-bright with stars, the feeling that they moved in an isolated world, with old responsibilities and fetters forgotten . . . languorous music drowning one's resistance . . . yes, it was all true. Perhaps when she got to New Zealand in cooler latitudes, she would come to her senses and see the issues clear-cut and realise that Morgan Mackay was no man to set her heart on. ...

Meanwhile she danced on.

As they went back to their table Morgan said, because he was so much taller and could see over most folks' heads, "I see Arnold and Dallas are joining the Lornes and the Palkingtons. Arnold's bound to ask you for a dance. He's got a soft spot for you, you know." Janet knew from his voice he was smiling derisively. He added: "Keep him as long as possible, I want Dallas on my own for a while tonight."

Someone bumped into them, apologised; they laughingly excused them, commented on the success of the ball, then Janet looked up and said hastily and guardedly because people were so close, "Morgan, I don't intend to connive at -"

But her words were lost in a blare of music from the band and as they reached the group Arnold took her hand, smiling at her. "It's hard to get a dance with you, Janet," and whirled her into the crowd.

Janet felt nausea rise up when she saw Morgan and Dallas slip outside. She kept Arnold from noticing, not because Morgan wished it but because he was too nice to hurt.

To her surprise he was a wonderful dancer, much better, in fact, than Morgan, who'd not had a lot of practice, he'd told her, and was usually bored stiff at dances. He'd said, twinkling down on her, to all intents and purposes the devoted fiancé, "I do sometimes go back home out of a sheer sense of duty . . . and spend most of the time as so many men do, talking sheep! So you know what you're letting yourself in for!"

Sometimes indignation at the way he kept up the pretence when not necessary boiled up within her. She said so. He looked at her through narrowed lids. "Except when we're quite alone, Jeanne-Marie, we will keep it up. We've got to. Quite a lot is at stake, you know, and for the sake of future happy relationships, you'll play up to me. Or else!"

When the dance ended she kept Arnold as long as possible. They went to the bar and had long iced lime drinks, nibbled salted peanuts, and tried as many of the tiny savouries as they could eat. She even found the courage to say: "Arnold, I've never in my life danced with anyone as good as you . . . let's have another? After all, Dallas isn't likely to lack partners, is she? I've never seen anyone look as exquisite as she does tonight."

Arnold beamed, "No, she's marvellous, isn't she?" Then he added hastily, "Not that she's any more lovely than you—each in your own way."

Janet laughed with real mirth. "Oh, Arnold, it's like comparing the beggar-maid and ... er ... let me see . . . Mary, Queen of Scots."

Arnold's eyes went sober. He pinched her chin. "King Cophetua married the beggar-maid, didn't he? And probably lived happy ever after. As Morgan will with you . . . your romance is a long-term one, isn't it? You're pals as well as lovers."

All sorts of emotions conflicted within Janet. A sudden fleeting realisation that it *could* have been that way, given other circumstances. Without Dallas to complicate things, for instance, or the foolish thing she herself had done, pretending she was only a friend of the children's. Deeper than all that was an immense sympathy for this man beside her, who deserved something better.

Or was she being too critical? Was there a compensating side to Dallas that only a husband might know? Then, succeeding all these thoughts, fear. Fear of what? She had to face it. Not only fear for Arnold because he didn't seem to know if *his* marriage would last but also fear for Morgan. No matter what her doubts of his integrity, she loved him. And between them he and Dallas could ruin other people's lives and their own.

Halfway through the waltz Janet saw Dallas and Morgan come back in. Dallas had a strange, excited air, even slightly apprehensive. Morgan had a blanched, tense look under his tan and a controlled something about his mouth. Suddenly an immense pity for them all washed over Janet. She'd never known temptation like this. Who was she to judge?

Oddly enough Morgan seemed to relax after that, but he did not dance with Dallas. Finally, she and Arnold drifted off into the circle of a group who were more sophisticated, and the friendly family atmosphere the Lornes and Palkingtons generated returned.

Janet felt lulled into near-security, an unreliable feeling that somehow, some day, somewhere, things might come out all right.

After supper Morgan said to her, "I don't think I can stick this out to the bitter end. How about a turn or two, then going to our cabins?" His tone was pure friendliness.

They stood by the rail, Janet's hair bleached by the moonlight to lint-white, a few loosened strands waving softly.

She put up a hand to smooth them down. "Good job we aren't going back to the ballroom, I'm dishevelled. I'm certainly not the never-a-hair-out-of-place type."

"Do you want to be?" asked Morgan almost absently.

"Well, it makes life much easier, you aren't always running for your mirror, or feeling all rats'-tails and untidy wisps."

He looked at her in amazement. "Rats'-tails! What a way to describe these!" For a fleeting instant his forefinger touched a strand that had escaped the clasp. "Much nicer than hair stiff with lacquer. Besides, nothing would keep hair tidy at Windrush Hill. You'd better leave it free there. The wind will blow it back from your face . . . and in winter be cold enough to sting your eyes."

Subconsciously he tossed back his own head a little, and suddenly Janet could see him, high on a hilltop, facing the wind sweeping up from the bottom of the world, moisture at the corners of his eyes and on the weather-beaten cheeks. Morgan's own world, not this glittery, synthetic world. Not Dallas Raymine's world.

She said softly: "Morgan, are you homesick?"

He smiled a little. "Aye. I've had enough of shipboard now. I'm longing to get home... to the bleating of ewes for their lambs instead of the mewing of sea-birds."

He wished it over, while *she* might as well admit it, she wanted to hold time still. Because now they were caught up into the painful intimacy of a mock engagement, and it was better than nothing!

He took her down to the cabin, hesitated, then said, "Thanks for a pleasant evening, and for the assistance, Janet."

Assistance! Helping him deceive a husband!

Janet said coldly: "I'd rather you didn't thank me, Morgan. I only do it because I have to." And left him standing there.

Sometimes they ran into rain squalls. Then Janet and the children loved to stay on deck, watching rain like gunmetal sheets advance across the ocean and engulf the ship till great pools gathered in awnings that hadn't been lowered in time. The clock went back its half-hour daily, the weather grew a little cooler and the passengers became more active.

Janet knew turmoil she had never before known. Sometimes she longed to be off the ship and away from Dallas's mocking and appraising eye, to have the meeting with Thomas MacNee over and done with, to know how one Elvira was going to treat the triplets; most of all, she told herself, to have this mock engagement terminated and find some job where she might be close to the children. There was a hospital in Tapanui, but it was only relatively close to Windrush Hill. Gore was still farther away, south.

One thing she clung to. Evidently Morgan was not going to give her away to Thomas. He'd written to the solicitor to tell him not to mention it. That was part of the bargain price. Evidently he did not want his own duplicity mentioned to his uncle. If Elvira was hateful to the children, and if their grandfather couldn't stand their noise and demands, perhaps he would allow her to take a small cottage in Tapanui itself and let her look after them. That way he would be able to keep an eye on them yet not have them disrupt

his no doubt orderly existence at his sheep-station. On the other hand, if he was a dyed-in-the-wool autocrat he'd probably be willing to sacrifice a little personal comfort for the satisfaction of being able to keep them under his thumb. But Janet kept the idea tucked at the back of her mind.

Other times she admitted she was deadly afraid of what might lie ahead; that she did not want this close companionship with Morgan to finish. But, of course, no hopes or fears have ever delayed the clock a second, even if at certain crisis points in one's life, it seems as if time stands still.

When the International Date Line was reached, she realised for the first time that the trip was indeed ending. She'd kept a small diary in which she had noted everything trivial and unimportant and put in nothing of the hopes and fears that she had known. Her earlier hours when she had scaled the heights and the succeeding ones when she plumbed the depths all went unrecorded.

And now one day had completely disappeared! Her unscientific brain couldn't accept it. Where had it gone? What would have happened in it? How would it have changed their lives? What a strange, stupid thing to be thinking. Time was illusory, anyway.

That afternoon they saw signs that land wasn't far away. But it was one thing to be told it and another to see birds that nested on land, circling the ship. Landfall ahead. What would it mean?

By tomorrow their clocks would be right with New Zealand time, they might even glimpse land by evening —or if not land, at least the long white cloud they had been told heralded landfall.

"Aotearoa," Morgan told the children, "the-land-of-the-long-white-cloud. That's what Kupe and his fellow-Maoris called it, voyaging over the Pacific from far-off Hawaiki. What causes it? I suppose

it's the mountains running like a great spine down the South Island, not in the middle but nearer the West Coast than the East. They must attract the cloud."

He said, grinning, to Janet a moment later, when the children had left them, "They will keep asking me questions I don't know. I'll have to rub my knowledge up to keep a jump ahead. Trouble is I don't know what they'll ask next. And if I do get away with something vague, the other two bowl me out by going into further sticky details. Kupe didn't land on the South Island—just realised that—so presumably you get the same effect approaching the North Island. Of course there are some big mountains there—but not a huge chain of them. There's Egmont, the ice-cream-cone mountain, out on a cape, then, farther inland, three together . . . Tongariro, with a sawn-off top, Ruapehu with glistening snow-sides and a hot crater lake above, and Ngauruhoe that is in eruption periodically. They're near the thermal area." He looked down on her. "Not to worry, Janet. There are no steam-vents near Tapanui. Even minor earthquakes are extremely rare in New Zealand. And earthquakes can happen anywhere."

"I'm not worrying about earthquakes. I'm much more likely to worry over personal disturbances. But I'll deal with them when we get to Windrush Hill. I'm more interested in finding out what those frightfully—to me—unpronounceable names mean."

"Rua—hole. Pehu—to explode or to make a loud noise. Ruapehu has a couple of steam-vents or blowholes. Tonga means the south wind and *riro* means carried away. It's said that Ngatoro-i-rangi was on the top of Tongariro and called out to his sisters in Hawaiki that he was perishing with the cold and wanted fire. His words were taken to them by the south wind.

"Ngauruhoe has more than one literal translation. Some are rather gruesome, concerning sacrifices being thrown into the crater to appease the gods. As far as the kids are concerned I'll plump for this: Nga means 'the'. Uru means the act of arranging hot stones in a Maori oven—a hangi—you cook the food on them, you see, all covered up—it's the most delicious food in the world. And hoe—accented on both the o and the e—is to toss out. When the mountain is in eruption it tosses out the hot stones."

Janet turned to him. "Morgan, I feel I should speak as I find you—I do appreciate -"

He burst out laughing. "I know what you mean. You're about to give the devil his due. Carry on, Candid Jane!"

She reddened a little. "I do appreciate your understanding of the children. I can't, of course, approve this mix-up with Dallas and Arnold, and don't care one bit for being dragged into it, but I like the way you study the children's sensibilities. Therese, now, *would* worry and worry over the idea of anyone being sacrificed in a boiling crater lake, even if it is only a legend. I try to strike a balance myself between overdoing the tempering of the wind to the shorn lamb and toughening them up so much that all these things are driven underground."

She looked up to catch a strange expression in the hazel-green eyes. He looked away instantly, then brought his gaze back and it was quite unreadable again. She must have imagined that slight, very slight, tenderness.

He said casually, "As far as the children are concerned we've agreed remarkably well. You've surprised me by your devotion to them. Once you and I understood each other and you knew I was

wise to you, we settled down to a fairly comfortable business arrangement."

Janet walked off and left him, or she would have lost her temper. She saw a steward going towards him with a message and knew a slight apprehension. What if the solicitor hadn't taken notice of Morgan's request and had let Thomas MacNee know who she was? She wished she'd stayed.

He came in search of her quite soon. "My uncle has just cabled me. He's ordered a Holden station wagon from Australia. It's in Wellington and will go over on the ferry with us. I can drive it away from the ship and take it down to Windrush Hill. It's most satisfactory. I've a stack of luggage and so have you. And it will be much nicer than going by train to Gore. Which is three hundred and twenty miles. From Christchurch, I mean." He grinned. "And Uncle adds his felicitations. I cabled him from Panama and wondered why he hadn't thought of sending his congratulations by radiotelephone. Trust a Scot to think the one cable could do the two! He'd know the Holden was coming and would hope it would get there first. Much better to break a car in yourself than have anybody drive it down from Christchurch—at least from Port Lyttelton."

When Dallas heard it her reaction was instant. "How really lovely! I told Arnold I refused to go by train and persuaded him to try for a rental car in Christchurch. If only he would travel by air! But now we can come with you."

Morgan's tone was very casual, probably because he saw Arnold frown. "Sorry, Dallas. I've arranged a surprise for my little family. I'm branching off at Timaru and taking them to the Hermitage at Mount Cook for a couple of days. I wanted them to see at least one of our famed beauty spots before settling down."

Dallas whipped round on Arnold, eyes wide, a little girl begging a treat. "Arnold, isn't that a glorious idea? Let's do the -"

He shook his head. "No, Dallas. By the time we get home we'll have been travelling twelve months, and I've had it. At times homesickness has nearly overwhelmed me. I can't wait to see Larch Hill one day longer. I was very disappointed when you cancelled our earlier bookings and stayed on in Mexico. Besides, you know what I am . . . and Morgan knows me too well to be offended. I hate travelling in a party and having to discover who wants to go where every blessed time an outing is suggested. You and I are going straight down that Main South Road as soon as ever we can."

Dallas accepted it, pouting like a thwarted five-year-old. As she walked off Therese said in a whisper: "Good old Arnold! I thought she'd have thrown a tantrum. Imagine having *her* with us!"

Janet turned scarlet and hurried her off.

CHAPTER SIX

THAT night they saw the long white cloud. Somewhere beneath it lay the country where, probably, they would spend the rest of their lives. The children took it as children do. Only Janet knew doubts, and spent a restless night. Once when she got up to peer out of the porthole, she saw lights like a half bracelet round some unknown bay, a lighthouse on a headland and a mass of shadow that was probably land.

Next morning they were coming into Wellington when they got on deck. Windy Wellington they called it, she knew. Perhaps it was maligned for it was still as a dream and the harbour water as blue as the Mediterranean.

A city of hills, it was, reaching back into range upon range of bush-clad mountains, colourful roofs stood out gaily, miniature skyscrapers rose, there were bright gardens, a sense of space and newness, even if it was just a century and a quarter old, because everywhere the green bush-clad hills upthrust unconquered-by-housing peaks among the residences and industrial sections.

It seemed, as always, to take a long time to berth. The official launch came out, left again; they could see knots of people on the wharves now, behind a barrier. There was endless chatter and conjecture on deck, New Zealanders enjoying to the hilt the chance to point out landmarks to tourists and immigrants.

Last-minute addresses were being exchanged . . . some friendships might survive, most wouldn't. A few young girls and young men were looking forlorn, imagining themselves in love and parting imminent.

Then, at last, the strange, almost ceremonial moment of putting your foot for the first time on a new country. The no less strange

feeling, after weeks on board, of accustoming yourself to walking on *terra firma*, *not* having to brace yourself against the roll of the ship.

Janet was amused to notice that both Arnold and Morgan had the preoccupied—and slightly exasperated—air of men much more concerned with the plaguey nuisance of managing luggage and women than the emotional one of stepping ashore and parting. Dallas tried to make a thing of saying goodbye, but got hustled into a taxi. Janet felt a load slip from her shoulders.

The all-night ferry steamer that was to take them halfway down the east coast of the South Island to Lyttelton, the port of Christchurch, was already at its berth.

There were two of them, the *Hinemoa* and this one, the *Maori*. They passed each other every night, linking the two islands. "We could have flown," said Morgan, "but we've a whale of a lot of excess luggage and we'd have had to wait till tomorrow for the Holden, anyway. And I'd sooner take it myself straight from the wharf."

"Will that Dallas be on board tonight?" asked Therese, avoiding Janet's eye.

"Yes. Why?"

"I just hope we don't have much to do with her, that's all. She bores me," said Therese.

Morgan sounded short. "Don't worry. You'll be into your bunks pretty early tonight."

Once he got the luggage transferred to the *Maori*, he took them to a restaurant for lunch. "We'll explore the city afterwards. It will catch you up on New Zealand knowledge. You must visit the House of Parliament first. It's not bad that your first contact should be with the capital."

After that, he hired a car and took them for a drive round the main hills of the city. The traffic was fast and thick, the streets narrower than most New Zealand cities, but they weren't to know that till Morgan told them. Wellington was circled with satellite towns, and people travelled long distances to come to work.

It was a bustling sea-port with people of all nationalities jostling each other, many of them sailors, many more students from the islands, Samoans, Fijians, Raratongans, Indonesians, Chinese, Malays, Ugandans, Nigerians, Indians.

They found it hard to distinguish them, but even in one afternoon they began to be able to distinguish the Maoris. They were very handsome people, with a grace of bearing that was instinctive.

"We are so intermingled," said Morgan, "that you don't see very many full-blooded Maoris now. I'm not saying there is *no* racial distinction—there is, more's the pity—but nothing like in some countries, and in time I hope we'll shed even that.

"Actually, I've an idea it would be good for all of us to have a dash of Maori in us. It could make us a happier, more musical people, less inclined to dive into the rat-race and develop ulcers and heart-disease trying to keep up with the Joneses. Maori-*pakeha* marriages don't always work, of course, occasionally the differences are too wide, but mostly they do. It depends, as always, on the two people concerned, though a little on the attitude of the rest of us. I believe the Minister for Maori affairs once said on the

air that he'd like to think his descendants had a touch of Maori in them. I'm inclined to think it could be ideal."

Janet wished passionately she didn't like him so much . . . like his ideas on all things—save one. It would have been nice if he had respected the sanctity of marriage too.

By the time the *Maori* slipped out of the harbour at eight o'clock the children were worn out. Janet got them smartly to bed and excused herself to Morgan.

She said simply: "There's no need now to play the devoted couple. What a relief to be normal and sincere. Arnold said he and Dallas were turning in soon too. It's all been a frightful strain. I'm going to read in bed. I've got a bottom bunk, so the light won't disturb the children." They had a four-berth cabin to themselves.

The children were up at sunrise to rush on deck. The wind was cold, but they had plenty to see. A long line of sand-dunes fringed the shore, street lights were winking out, and ahead of them was a great peninsula and the Heads at the entrance to Lyttelton Harbour which was a drowned volcanic crater of long ago.

These were bare, inhospitable hills; Morgan, joining them, said that though they looked grey in the pallid dawn light, they were covered with yellow tussock and honeycombed with walking tracks, and had pockets of bush surviving in the gullies. Beyond those sand-hills, seven or eight miles across the Canterbury Plains, lay the city of Christchurch, as English as you could find. The seaside suburbs came right to the edge of the sea.

Most people would go through the hills by the train tunnel, but they would use the new road tunnel, a marvellous convenience, though he himself always missed the longer, steep ride over Evan's Pass and the compensating glory of the view of Pegasus Bay,

reaching north for a hundred miles. There were dozens of cars lashed to the deck.

The water in the harbour was almost always this deep, wonderful green, he said. Lyttelton itself was tiny, clinging to steep hills, but there were residential homes and weekend baches in all the little over-harbour bays.

The train had left, with the Raymines on it, long before the Holden came off in its sling. The two boys thoroughly approved it, talking about its probable performance, while Therese contented herself with admiring the two-tone upholstery.

They had to get in quickly and drive off. Morgan said: "You boys in front, Therese and Janet in the back."

Naturally, he didn't want her in front. No need for pretence now. They could take it up again at Windrush Hill. She hoped Dallas didn't visit there often. But no doubt she would find excuses.

But Morgan said over his shoulder, "Later you two can have a turn in front, but for the moment Connal and Tom will want to see how this works. Comes to the bit I'd like to know myself. Where is the lowest gear? Ah, got it. Christchurch, here we come!"

They emerged from the tunnel at Heathcote where the slopes of the hills sheltered orchards and tomato houses and joined the stream of traffic making for the city up Ferry Road.

This was a well-laid-out city, with a Cathedral Square to mark its centre and memorials to pioneers dotted about. It was enclosed in a mile square, by great avenues of English trees, and the suburbs sprawled beyond that. The Avon, a gentle stream, meandered through banks of shaven green turf, completely untypical of New Zealand rivers, said Morgan. Usually they burst out of gorges in

the mountains, sprawled out across great shingle beds, dividing into many channels and only in flood running bank to bank. They were snow-fed. This merely rose from springs outside the city area.

They did not dally. After breakfast Morgan ran them briefly round the avenues, Rolleston, Fitzgerald, Moorhouse and Bealey, named after the city's founders.

Then they swept through Hagley Park, that could have been an English one, each side of the main road. It was autumn and the colours clear and bright.

"But you'll get plenty of native bush—evergreen—back of Windrush Hill," said Morgan. "Plus the great cultivated exotic forests. When I say bush I mean great trees, of course, not just low scrub."

They were conscious of great spaciousness, of vast plains that were yet fertile, wheat-belt and sheep-producing country, always with the classical white peaks of the great backbone of Alps, westward. One of the great rivers was over a mile wide.

"The Rakaia," said Morgan. "It's a fearsome sight in flood, though it rarely does much damage—the bed's so wide it holds a terrific volume of water. Up west, of course, it's much narrower where it forces through the gorge."

They looked up-river and could see the great cleft in the mountains, even at that distance. "There's another Windrush up there. The winds that come through the Rakaia Gorge and across the plains are something to be reckoned with but, unlike our winds, that have a razor edge of cold to them, the worst one here is a hot dry wind. Very exhausting. It's come right over the Tasman from

Australia and drops its moisture on the watershed of the Alps and races across the plains breathing fire and brimstone.

"I believe that in the early days when there were no trees on the plains save the occasional cabbage-tree there were terrific dust-storms. At afternoon church services they would have the lights on. Even now, after flooding, when the river recedes, all the lupins in the river-bed between the streams get covered with silt and the first strong nor'wester after the drop swirls the silt along in clouds. In the nineteen-fifties there was one like that, and a chap told me he had to have his lights on going over the bridge."

It was a relief in the monotony when they came to a bend past the Rangitata. Morgan had jerked his thumb westward as they passed over the first bridge of the great Rangitata. "Up there, towards the mountains, is Erewhon, Samuel Butler's sheep-station, where he wrote his great novel of that name."

At Orari the landscape changed, taking on gentler outlines, becoming greener, with bends in the road to rest the eye. Winchester was a tiny hamlet, a township Morgan called it, sweet with trees and bright with beautiful gardens, as was Temuka.

"It probably means the fierce oven," said Morgan hastily, trying to recover the face he'd lost with the triplets by not knowing what Orari meant. "We're nearly to Timaru, the second city of Canterbury. *Ti* is the name of our cabbage-tree and *maru* means shelter. Just as Oamaru, farther south, is the place of the god, Maru. Maru, as a god, is a god of the sea. There are many meanings to some Maori words."

They had lunch at Timaru, a sea-port with a man-created shipping harbour, the great breakwaters reaching out sheltering arms to protect the lovely curve of Caroline Bay.

"We're one hundred miles from Christchurch now and we turn west and south for more than another hundred —very different miles."

Connal said: "How far to Tapanui from Mount Cook, Morgan?"

"Now you've got me! Let me see . . . well, Gore is two hundred and ninety miles from Cook, and we're not far short of Gore."

"Gosh, aren't we doing some travelling!"

Morgan's eyes met Janet's in the mirror. "Are they okay for travelling so far? Do they ever get car-sick?"

"No, they did so much travelling with Louis and Cecile without feeling any nausea I think they should be all right." Then because she hated mentioning their source of conflict, she added hastily, "Aren't you glad Mount Cook has an English name? It saves you racking your brain for the Maori meaning. Is it after Captain Cook?"

"Yes, Captain Cook came to New Zealand in 1769, so our highest mountain—over twelve thousand feet—is named after him, also Cook Strait which we passed last night just out of Wellington." He laughed. "But it doesn't save me from more translations ... we also call Cook by Aorangi, the Cloud Piercer. But everyone knows that, no trouble."

It was all very pleasant and Janet decided she might as well give herself up to the enjoyment of this day or two and not start dreading the arrival at Windrush Hill till it was closer upon her.

Perhaps Morgan felt that way too. Perhaps he was less emotionally disturbed with Dallas and Arnold far from them. At all events he pulled to a stop, said, "Now, boys, as you've talked non-stop about

her performance and the fors and againsts of every car that's passed us in a hundred miles, you can hop in the back now and let Janet and Therese in front."

"Fair enough," said Thomas cheerfully, "out we get, Connal." He grinned up at Morgan, the freckles standing out on his short, pert nose. "Naturally, you want your loved one with you."

Janet didn't feel much of a loved one. It was a relief not having to play it up too much just now. She'd have to as soon as they reached Windrush Hill, she supposed.

The lovely miles unfolded, the distance between the farms and the variety of the scenery amazing them at first. In an unguarded moment Janet said, eyes wide to drink in every bit of changing horizon, "This is a country to love, it's so new, so uncluttered."

"You mean you like it for itself. . . not just as a land of opportunity?"

Therese, her head turned round to the back seat, was having an argument with the boys. Janet said in a low voice to Morgan, "Are you going to twit me every chance you get? Because I don't think I can take it. You'd better watch out."

Surprisingly, Morgan said immediately, "Sorry, Janet. I admit that was mean," and his hand left the wheel to touch her fingers fleetingly. It was so unexpected and softening that Janet had to blink.

To cover up she said fiercely, "Listen, you three, it's not a bit of good arguing like this when none of you can be sure what breed of sheep it was. Ask Morgan."

He chuckled. "You were all wrong. They were Corriedales. There are a lot of Corriedales round here, of course, their home is not far from Oamaru."

He was patient with the children, stopping every now and then to let them see something at closer quarters, buying them drinks and ice-creams, for though it was May and the air had a tingle of it outside the car, inside it was hot because the sun shone from a cloudless sky.

As they left the little township of Fairlie behind and moved up into Burke's Pass, the warmth seemed to close in on them, but as soon as the steep road widened into the river flats the wind from the mountains lowered the temperature.

Janet almost forgot the complexities of their relationship, the problems ahead, listening to Morgan retailing the adventures of Mackenzie and his dog, the great sheep-rustler that this Mackenzie country was named after. How odd ... he was practically a hero.

Lake Tekapo suddenly burst on their sight, a sheet of milky-turquoise water, like something spectacularly technicoloured, rimmed with far, silver-snowy mountains and dark pines.

Morgan made time for them to see the little lonely Church of the Good Shepherd, challengingly braced on the bare tussocky hillside with no trees to shelter it from the storms that would sweep down the water, the lake boulders that fashioned it, still with lichens clinging. A church of white blizzards and yellow dust-storms, a church of shepherds and mountaineers.

In its atmosphere of worship as they came towards the plate-glass window that was the backdrop for the plain cross and candlesticks ... a window that needed no stained-glass symbols of their Maker's love towards His people, framed as it was in the beauty of

mountain, lake and sky . . . Janet felt her scorn and disillusionment of this man beside her dropping from her.

Who knew what havoc and wretchedness Dallas had made of his life? Who knew with what wiles she still strove to hold him?

It lasted the score of miles through Simon's Pass till they came to Lake Pukaki. "Sometimes, of course," Morgan had said earlier, "it's grey and forbidding at the time of day we'll reach it. And at any time it can be stormswept, with Aorangi not only piercing the clouds but using them as a cloak. I'd like you to see it as it can be, since we probably won't be up this way for some time."

"Unless you come to the mountains for your honeymoon," said Therese sensibly.

Morgan had laughed outright. "It's an idea, Tessie. But even that won't be very soon."

"Won't it? Our mother always said she didn't believe in long engagements. That it put a big strain on two people. I wonder why, though." Therese's small face was full of innocence. "After all, you'd think the longer you got to know a person the safer it'd be, wouldn't you, Morgan? Why *do* people not like long engagements, Morgan?"

His voice wasn't very steady. "I—er—can't imagine why, either. Um . . . perhaps it's in case other people butt in and make mischief."

"Like you read about in books?"

"Not only in books, Tess. It happens quite often in real life."

Janet moved restlessly. Had Dallas and Morgan ever been engaged? There was that house. Had someone made mischief?

Therese looked up at Morgan confidently. "But you wouldn't let anyone make mischief between you and Janet, would you, Morgan? Because you're the same sort of people. You *ought* to get married."

He chuckled. "Do you know what, poppet? I think you've got something there."

The small brow wrinkled anxiously. "Then why don't you get married real soon?"

Janet moved uneasily again. "Therese, you must -"

But Morgan was equal to it. "I've been away over a year, Therese. And we'd like a really slap-up wedding, wouldn't we, Janet? Well, that takes a lot of arranging for and there's a big time ahead catching up with the farm work. It couldn't be before next year, and even then we'd want to get harvest over."

"When's harvest?"

"Oh, January, February, March."

"Good, I'll be eleven by then and a lot taller. Nobody could take me for a flower-girl. I'll be your bridesmaid. Janet hasn't got anybody else, has she?"

"No, it would have to be you. You'd make a lovely bridesmaid, Therese. Perhaps Connal and Tommy could be page-boys ... in their kilts."

The boys howled with laughter. "Us! Just imagine! You've got a hope!"

Therese gave them up and started in on Janet. "What do you fancy, Janet? White velvet? Or lace? Or satin or brocade?"

Fortunately, at that moment Pukaki came in sight and Janet was saved an answer by the children's delighted reaction to it.

It was something between deep blue and green, like shot taffeta, and the nearer end was catching the sunset and turning to rose and amethyst and smoky fire. At the head of the lake, in dazzling purity, was Mount Cook, beside it Mount Tasman, and both of them and the whole range of giants were mother-of-pearl, dreamy and remote, reaching up towards the sky, like a land of dreams.

"That's the way we always hope overseas visitors will see it. I hope it stays that way tomorrow, when we can see it from the plane."

"Plane?" Four voices said it in perfect unison.

"Your grandfather said if the weather was good I was to take you on one of the scenic flights. They're little Cessnas, and if there's enough snow fallen on Tasman Glacier we land there—the planes wear skis—but don't set your heart on it in case there hasn't been. We'll charter a couple to fly over Franz Josef Glacier too—on the West Coast—and the Fox Glacier. Sorry we won't all be together, but there's only room for three and the pilot. Janet and Therese can go in one and we'll go in the other."

Janet said faintly: "Did you say their grandfather said to do this? It will cost A mint of money, won't it?"

"Well, relatively." He grinned. "I think you may have the wrong idea of him. He's no skinflint. He likes value for his money, can't

bear waste. Few Scots can. But he knows how to spend too. I rang him from Wellington when you were tidying the kids in that rest-room.

"I told him I was thinking of taking you to the Hermitage on the way down. He thought it a grand idea and suggested the flights. But he wants us home the day after tomorrow as there's to be a grand demonstration of tractor safety measures on Windrush Hill later in the week. He's as excited as a schoolboy over it." He hesitated, added, "I only hope Elvira doesn't get in a flap and spoil his enjoyment. She can put on a marvellous spread—none better—but she does get short in the temper when there's a lot to do."

Janet thought, but did not say, that her temper would hardly be improved by having a nurse and triplets thrust upon her that week, either!

As she saw the modern magnificence of the Hermitage she blinked. "I'd thought from its name that it would be monastically bare. You know—stone floors and refectory tables and big fireplaces where we would boil a billy—a sort of glorified mountain camp."

Morgan chuckled. "It's one of our luxury hotels. Cook is one of our main tourist attractions, remember."

The children gazed open-mouthed at the deep carpets, the plateglass scenic windows that brought the mountains right into the hotel; the souvenir shop and later the lavishness of the dining-room and the artistry of the food display on the tables reduced them to silence, if only temporarily.

Morgan said in an aside to Janet: "I'd have thought since they have seen so much of the Continent with your —with Louis—they'd not have been so wide-eyed."

He'd nearly said: "With your stepfather." It was to be hoped he didn't slip in front of Thomas MacNee.

"Oh, they didn't travel in this style, Morgan. They stayed in cheap pensions or took beach houses. Louis didn't care how poor and bare it was as long as it had atmosphere and he was free to paint."

"How did it appeal to you?"

"I didn't go along much. Just on brief holidays when I'd join them if I had the money. I saw more of it, of course, earlier. I mean before my own mother died. But mostly they left me at school." She looked up, saw the look on his face and said fiercely, "I didn't mind. I was happy at school. I like to be settled. I don't want you being sorry for me, excusing my deceit. I didn't say it for that. You'd better watch out, Morgan Mackay . . . and not soften towards me. It might only mean I'm looking for a more settled existence now. Remember? You think I've got an eye to the main chance!"

He merely said mildly: "Perhaps you'd better marry me after harvest next year, after all, then. Think how it would please Therese."

"An excellent reason for marriage," said Janet tartly, and called the children. They had bought postcards for everyone in their class at home in Scotland.

Later that night when the children were sleeping an exhausted sleep, Janet went down to the lounge. Morgan came across to her.

He smiled with a faint hint of derision. "Are you going to be like all the others," he gave a faint jerk of his head, "and turn your back on all that beauty outside? See that woman over there? She was tatting when we came in . . . with her back to the sunset over

Aorangi! She's still tatting. What do you think she'll say when she gets back home? She's from Hamilton. She'll say she had a wonderful holiday . . . 'Look at all the doileys I managed to get done!' Ye gods! Everyone else is playing cards or reading. Let's go for a walk."

The ache that was never far from Janet these days gave her a twinge. He was so kindred. She could understand him being furious about her deception. Most men would have been. But not that he hankered after another man's wife. He ought to have accepted it once they were married, disciplined himself. She was sure one could. That it could die a natural death if it were not nurtured.

But for that she might have tried to explain her motives once more, endeavoured to convince him it was not to gain a financial footing in the Windrush Hill estate. But what was the use? Nevertheless, it would have been far better had she found him altogether unlikeable.

Her sense of justice, never long dormant, reared up. She'd been scathing in her thoughts about him, about his choice, had wondered how a man of his type *could* fancy Dallas, her nature was so selfish, so unattractive, whatever her looks might be. But, if she were honest, how much different was she herself, falling in love with Morgan who must have a definite flaw in his character?

It was a cold but glorious night, the air with a cider-sharp tang to it. No moon, but a myriad stars made its absence unregretted. The sheer whiteness, not only of Aorangi and Tasman but the whole range, reflected back their light. It was starkly pale and pure. There seemed no room for pettiness.

She had pulled on a scarlet Tyrolean cap with a scarf attached and gloves to match and was snug in her camel-hair coat. She lifted her face to the heights.

How different this would have been had Dallas been with them. She said, slowly, "There's a bigness about this ... I can even stop worrying about meeting the triplets' grandfather."

Morgan turned her round by her elbow, kept his hand under it and marched her down the road. The dark bush below the peaks enclosed them, all about them streams gurgled and sang, on their way to join the lake. Above and beyond they knew that a vast river of ice crawled down the mountainsides, but here was a small world. The world of two people.

Morgan said slowly, "Their grandfather will be all right. It's Elvira's reactions I worry about. Especially as -"

He took so long to finish it she prompted him. "Especially as what?"

He shrugged. "Especially with us becoming engaged. Or pretending we are."

Janet digested this, said in an astonished tone, "Why, how old is Elvira? I thought -"

"She's thirty-five. I'm thirty. Not a big difference. It's on what some folk call the wrong side, but—well, you see that was what made the trouble at Windrush Hill in the first place. She had always cared for Alasdair, so she took it out on Cecile when Alasdair brought her here."

Janet said, "I didn't know. Cecile never said."

"My mother said Cecile never guessed. That, in a way, made Elvira madder than ever—that Cecile did not regard her as capable of rousing feelings in Alasdair. Mother said that but for Elvira the situation could have been better, that she's sure that when Cecile and Alasdair and the babies went off to France, Elvira was glad, that she thought Alasdair would become so heartsick for Windrush Hill that he would return, leaving Cecile with her own folk.

"Of course, Alasdair fell ill and died. I came to Windrush Hill. I'm afraid Elvira—gosh, it makes a chap feel a fool saying this—set her cap at me. Well, it's not going to make you popular with her, is it?"

Janet was appalled. The situation had been bad enough. Now it was twice as bad. She'd been hoping old Thomas might approve of her. He seemed to have a lot of faith in Morgan and that would have predisposed him to like her. She had a sensible Scots name and she was fairly sure she could manage the children well enough to win his respect. She had known Elvira would be difficult, but had never dreamed that this bogus engagement would be another threat to a happy solution.

They came to a little bridge, deep in the shadows. They stopped and leaned on it.

Morgan said, a strange note in his voice, "You haven't commented on it—on what I've just told you."

There was strain in Janet's voice and bewilderment. She raised her face to look above the serrated tops of the pines to the chilly heights as if seeking inspiration.

There was reluctance in her voice too. "I've been used to sudden changes in my life . . . Dad dying when I was so young, Mother marrying again . . . though I loved Louis, he brought such colour

and variety and affection into my mother's life, but I had to adapt to that. . . then Mother dying and Louis marrying Cecile. I was scared stiff, she didn't seem my sort. She wasn't, either, but for some queer reason we got on fine together. And it was such fun, for the first time, to have brothers and a sister. But now I'm more afraid than I've ever been in my whole life of what lies ahead.

"It sounds grim. A grandfather who may resent what he sees of Cecile in the children; a housekeeper who hated their mother and who will hate me because I'm engaged to you." She turned to Morgan, said desperately: "Morgan, I think we'd better have the quarrel we intended to have later right now. Let's break the engagement. Let's say we were too hasty. That we made a mistake. We can say we intend to remain just good friends if you think it would be awkward otherwise. After all, if we can pretend we love each other, we can surely pretend friendship! But honestly, I don't think I can live with Elvira if she's going to regard me as her successful rival. And you only needed me as a sort of cloak on the ship to—to throw dust in Arnold's eyes."

Morgan said sharply, "What makes you think the situation's so different now? It would only waken Arnold's suspicions if the engagement was of so short a duration. He might even suspect Dallas knew all along I was getting that ship home and delayed their stay in Mexico purposely—as she did. We're going to see quite a lot of the Raymines, you know, we can't avoid it.

"I'm sorry, I realise it isn't going to be easy for you— but when you were trying to excuse your own masquerade, you said you'd do anything to be with the children. I'd like to be able to believe that, but I can't if you turn down this chance of being with them. Anyway, Elvira might have stopped looking my way. Anything could have happened in a year. And you're more likely to get on to

terms with her than Cecile . . . you're so sensible and wholesome—apart from this stupid deception."

Janet felt caught in a trap. If Morgan wouldn't believe she had done it solely for the children's sakes, Thomas MacNee wasn't likely to. She'd have to carry on. And suddenly she wanted to be anything but sensible and wholesome! She wanted to be glamorous and fascinating . . . she wanted someone to spoil her as Arnold did Dallas, to love her without rhyme or reason.

She said, in a hard, tight little voice, "I've no choice, have I? But let's walk back. I've only made a fool of myself, showing you some of my inner feelings, appealing to a better side you don't appear to have! Right, I *can* face anything for the children—not that you'll think I'm sincere and open in saying that. You will probably still think I want a share in the Windrush prosperity . . . right! You can think it. *I* don't care. And I'm not going to worry about any of you ... about Dallas or Arnold, Grandfather MacNee *or* that Elvira. She can go jump in Lake Tekapo for all I care. I'll look after the triplets and do my best for them."

She realised, incredibly, that there was the suspicion of a laugh in Morgan's voice. "It would be an awfully long way for Elvira to come ... to jump in Lake Tekapo! But we've got some really deep mountain tarns in West Otago."

She turned on him in a flash. "And don't laugh at me, either, I meant every word I said!"

She was off like a lintie, running swiftly along the shingle road, little bits of gravel spurting up from her shoes.

It took Morgan longer than he thought to catch her, but catch her he did, grabbing her arm and swinging her roughly round to face him.

"Don't be such an idiot! Someone else might have decided to see the mountains by starlight. It would create a scandal to see you streaking up the road like this, with me in hot pursuit, or even if we came in separately. You can't afford to lose your temper with me, Jeanne-Marie!"

"Neither can you with me," she stormed. "If I don't want you to tell Mr. MacNee I'm Jeanne-Marie, you want even less for me to tell Arnold we were never engaged . . . that it was a put-up job to pull the wool over his eyes. So don't taunt me till I lose my temper. It doesn't often happen, but heaven knows what I'll say if I really fly off the handle. It could be the very last moment you'd want me to reveal what we're up to."

He seemed to be holding his breath. Were the vials of his wrath about to be loosed upon her . . . and his hands were like steel. Her arms would show bruises tomorrow.

He burst out laughing. "You little termagant! I didn't think you had it in you. You look exactly like a golden-haired fairy wearing the expression of a tiger. You really are something when you get into a rage, my dear Jeanne-Marie!"

She had absolutely no warning of his intention till his lips were on hers. There was certainly no yielding this time. Her body was as taut as a violin-string in his arms. By now her anger was cold and directed against herself as much as against him. She ought to have had more dignity than to have roused him like this.

When he took his mouth away she said frigidly: "Have you quite done?"

He grinned unrepentantly. "Yes, I think so. It will do to be going on with, anyway."

Janet had to keep a tight rein on herself. She would have liked to have wiped that smile off his face.

She said, her eyes steady, "I don't like the sort of man who responds only to provocation. And I'd better warn you, Morgan Mackay, that despite your family motto I don't like strong-arm tactics, and if you intend this sort of insult very often I'm afraid I'd find it too high a price to pay even for the children, so watch it!"

He turned her round towards the Hermitage, said in a low, controlled voice, still with that maddening hint of amusement in it, "My dear Janet, that would be much more convincing if we had disliked each other on sight. But, before I found you out, you were quite different. You didn't mind my nearness then."

Janet found the courage to say: "No. I admit that. But it was merely surface attraction. Before I found out what you were like—ready to drive a hard bargain. Now, I prefer you at arms' length."

"Then how," he inquired, "are we going to appear genuinely in love in front of my uncle? And everyone else?"

"Your uncle is nearly three hundred miles away at the moment. Till then, I would be very grateful if you didn't aggravate me by—if you didn't aggravate me."

When they reached the Hermitage she went straight to bed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was the oddest situation. Because of the children, because of her ring, because of fellow-guests, they had to slip back next morning into their pretence. It overlaid their quarrel of the night before, their underlying distrust of each other. Till the sham seemed the real thing and the conflict just imaginary.

Janet dissociated her mind from future problems and resolved to enjoy this breathtakingly beautiful scenery as much as she could. The weather was kind to them, the planes small enough to be exciting; you felt you could reach out and touch the sharp tent ridge of Mount Cook, you saw ice-falls and traverses, passes and crevasses that normally only mountaineers knew. Your eyes almost ached with such beauty, glittering pinnacles and deep blue ice-clefts, classical peaks and plunging cliffs.

They swooped over the Great Divide, saw the Tasman breaking on the narrow width of the province that was called West Coast, the vast spreads of the Franz Josef and the Fox glaciers. Back on the Canterbury side again they landed on the snow thickly covering the Tasman Glacier, and two planes looking like bright birds against the white.

Janet and Tommy saw Therese and Connal rushing towards them, eager to swap experiences, with the pilot and Morgan behind. Therese had begged to go with Morgan. She was fast developing a crush there.

They had an hour on the glacier, then returned, able to do full justice to the elegant and delicious meal.

That night Janet did not go walking with Morgan. She sat most of the time with a woman who had come out from Argyllshire twenty-five years ago and was nostalgic for news of home.

When she woke next morning for the very early breakfast they had requested, she knew a big day was ahead, nearly three hundred miles of travelling. Then Windrush Hill. Not just Windrush Hill but Grandfather MacNee and the formidable Elvira. There would be weeks of strain ahead, getting three high-spirited children accepted as part of the life there. It lay on Janet's spirits like an anchor.

It went with her through all the scenery that so diverted the others, the rough mountain passes, yellow like guinea-gold, dry and arid, the great Benmore hydro-electric scheme with its largest-in-the-world earth dam, its huge man-made lake; down to Oamaru, a small white town, with its limestone buildings set by an opalescent sea.

Morgan explained that they could have kept to the mountain passes, going down through the Lindis to Cromwell in Central Otago, but he thought it better to work back to the Main South Road by the coast and take them through Dunedin, so they didn't feel Windrush Hill was so far from civilisation.

"Plenty of time for trips into Central in the years ahead. Your grandfather loves travelling round there—it's the fruit-growing and lake district. You'll see the lot in time. And we have snow-sports right at our back door, of course."

The years ahead. What would they hold for Janet? Would she be part of this family still? She supposed, rather drearily, that when she and Morgan faked their disagreement and announced that they would not marry after all, she would find work somewhere, and hope the children had come to rely on her less by then.

She would have to disarm this Elvira if she could so she could have access to the children. But how, when this very engagement

ring on her finger would set up a deep core of resentment? Janet knew a cold fear that seemed physical.

After Oamaru, where the ground was dry and parched, but the hills were beautiful and reminded her of Scotland, the road swept nearer the coast, with great Pacific rollers coming in. Morgan stopped occasionally for them to stretch their legs, but for short periods now. He wanted to be home in daylight.

They began to climb hills that, until they'd been at such close quarters with the Alps, they would have called mountains. On the right, range after range of these partly bush-clad hills stretched back into the hinterland that was Central Otago. They came to a wide lagoon at Waitati.

"It should really be Waitete," Morgan hurriedly forestalled the triplets, "the-water-frequented-by-blue-ducks. This whole sweep of bay is called Blueskin Bay, because from the motorway where we go now, the area, with dark trees clustering round the shore, is exactly the colour of a tattooed warrior's skin. No, we don't tattoo now—I mean they don't. You may find the odd, extremely old wahine—Maori woman—with a tattooed chin indicating that she's married, but they're fast disappearing. From here we go up the motorway and down into Dunedin, then thirty-six miles south we turn west into Central, then strike back south for West Otago."

They all lost their hearts to Dunedin, the tiny Water of Leith winding through, its brightly coloured roofs scattered on the many hills like confetti, the grey university buildings and spires, the tree-green Octagon with a mossy Robbie Burns looking down on it, and, farther out, miles of new suburbs with pastel-coloured wooden houses and gay gardens.

The Main South Road again, a glimpse of the Taieri Plains where the airport was situated, the Maignatuas rising beyond and over all, a greenness not seen farther north, a heavier rainfall.

"Practically all sheep," commented Tommy. "Not much cropping, but a few poultry runs."

The gardens were still bright with late chrysanthemums and dahlias, even a few roses, and masses of cotoneasters and spindleberries. The hedges were red with hawthorn. The English trees had turned glorious colours. Morgan thought they must have had a few severe frosts already for them to be so advanced. There were many evergreen trees they did not know.

Past Milton they turned west into the hills, and poplars here were blazing torches, oaks russet, the sycamores and willows golden. The hillsides were scarred from gold-fossicking days, and some of the small towns had ramshackle hotels fallen into disuse after the rush that had started in the roaring sixties had subsided.

"Though some day I'll take you washing for gold, and you can get a bit of dust and send it back to your schoolmates," Morgan promised them.

They were puzzled by their first glimpse of the mighty Clutha River. "You'd think they put dye in it," said Thomas. "It's greeny-blue. I've never seen anything so beautiful."

Neither had Janet. Yet at the moment she was experiencing an overwhelming longing for the softer, more muted tones of the rivers and burns back home. There was something almost arrogant, almost hostile, about a country that shouted its colours at you like this. It looked like some impossible tourist poster.

Morgan looked down at the small face beside him. "Tired?" he asked.

The gentleness was almost Janet's undoing. She swallowed. "A little. It's been a long ride."

He patted the hand that lay in her lap. "Never mind, we'll soon be home and you can sort out your impressions. A good night's sleep and you'll be ready—even eager—to see everything."

All pretence! He had to keep up, even in front of the children, some show of solicitude.

The farmhouses were very well kept, gleamingly painted, with—in the main—glorious gardens.

"All due to the womenfolk. The farmers here usually leave the gardens—even the vegetable gardens—to their wives and daughters. But not at Windrush Hill. My uncle took it on after Aunt Isabel died. Elvira didn't care for it. Aunt Isabel loved her garden so much Uncle Thomas couldn't bear to see it go. Though sometimes in the busier seasons he finds it hard to make time for it."

Janet said diffidently: "Would he allow me to help there, do you think?" She added in a low voice, "It might get me out of Elvira's way."

"Might be an idea. Elvira won't countenance anyone taking over in the house—and she's critical of what anyone tries to do, in any case. I don't think Uncle would have any objection to you working in the garden. But feel your way *with him*. Pick a *hectic time* and ask if you can trim the edges or weed a rosebed."

Thomas said: "I've been looking at these banks—the cuttings the road goes through. There's very little top-soil."

"Good for you! You're dead right. We're still building up topsoil. The rest is clay. We use a lot of super and lime and what-have-you. Up the North Island a lot of it is rich volcanic stuff. Your grandfather will be glad to see you interested in such things. We do a lot of topdressing by air at Windrush Hill, it's so steep. You'll be able to help."

"I like the schools," said Therese. "What lovely playgrounds they have, all fields."

"We call them paddocks mostly," said Morgan, but pleasantly, so Therese felt she was getting information, not being sat upon. "Well, we aren't short of space, as you'll notice."

Therese continued: "And they all have those lovely swimming baths with blue-painted sides. I'm going to like New Zealand."

"You'll go by school to Balloch, over hill and dale, but you'll have to walk a quarter of a mile to the corner to be picked up. Though we'll take you in wet weather. Your father and your aunt always went by pony, of course. But now we have a wonderful bus system. In the case of Balloch School, the headmaster drives it. You'll meet the other schools in the district on sports days and pet show days."

"Are there other villages near?"

Morgan grinned. "Not what *you'd* call near. Yes, Dunrobin, Kelso, Heriot, Edievale, Moa Flat, Crookston and a few Maori names I don't know the meaning of, so I won't divulge them till I find out. I can see I've got a busy time ahead, keeping one jump in front of

you youngsters! By the way, some are more districts than villages."

"Any moas at Moa Flat?" asked Connal hopefully.

"I think you know they're extinct," said Morgan. "Long ago, though, an old lady who died in Dunedin not many years ago may have been the last person to see one, away down in the Fiordland area, when she was a child. They were huge things, like ostriches."

They climbed some steep bluffs, and just past Rae's Junction Hotel turned left for West Otago.

The country changed. Ahead of them lay hills covered with the bluish-green of pine forests, the Blue Mountains, Morgan said, that lay above Tapanui. Trees clustered more thickly about the farms now, oaks, larches, sycamores, poplars. On the horizon of some of the newly planted hills, baby firs rose up darkly like a black picot edge. The sheep seemed dazzlingly white against the emerald turf, big timber lorries lumbered past, and over to the south-west was a range of mountains with lines of shimmering white snow in the horizontal ridges peculiar to it; Whitecombs it was aptly called.

Back into the mountains behind and around Tapanui the forestry extended, dark patches intersected with huge firebreaks.

"I'd like you to have seen Tapanui, but it's too late. We branch off here and head for the hills." They turned right and began to climb, the road winding round the hills and going deeper and deeper, and up and up.

Wild ducks were flying overhead, widening out in a V, reminding Janet intolerably of Scotland.

Therese said suddenly: "Where's the Raymines' homestead?"

"You can't see it from this road. Although we share a boundary, we don't share a road and can't see each other's places. They come in from a road that leads up from Tapanui. We're more in touch by phone than anything. It's twenty miles by road."

"Praise the saints!" said Therese. "Arnold's a good sort, but a bit tame—but I can't stand that Dallas. Saying I ought to be called Morag or Kirsty! She got at me another day, too, and called me a poor wee thing. Said Granddad naturally wanted the boys, farmers always did, but *I'd* better mind my p's and q's."

Morgan started to say something, but Therese continued, "I wouldn't let *her* see I was scared of Granddad. I said to her: 'Pooh, I'm as good as a boy any day, and very good with poultry. I'm looking forward to meeting my granddad . . . and I didn't think grown-ups ought to say things like that!' That shut her up."

Janet had seen Morgan's hands tighten on the wheel. She hadn't, been able to think of anything to head Therese off. No man would relish his lady-love being spoken of like that, especially when he knew Janet knew he loved her. She flinched for Therese's sake. Morgan would think she'd been impertinent.

Unexpectedly, he laughed. "Therese, you can certainly hold your own! No one need fight *your* battles. Your granddad is all right."

Janet wondered.

They swept round a curve, very near the crest of the hills, so, as Windrush Hill was said to be very exposed, they must be near.

Morgan waved a hand. "We've been running between Windrush Hill paddocks for quite some time. It goes each side of the road and the road itself finishes at the entrance. We have cattle-stops, not a gate. It saves opening. Ah, there we are . . . it's in those trees,

but you can't see it from here. The trees shelter it from the sou'westers to a certain extent."

The situation was magnificent. Janet thought it might be possible even to see the sea. A shingled drive led from the cattle-stops for an amazing distance before it reached the trees round the house. The drive was really an avenue, with widely spaced English and native trees. They dared not plant too closely because snow would lie deeply here, unthawed.

The cattle-stops were stone-walled . . . entrancing stone . . . lavender, green, slatey-blue, rose-pink, grey with glistening mica particles—stone from the Shotover River and Lake Wakatipu mostly. At one side stood a clump of silver birches, festooned for autumn with golden sovereigns of leaves that looked as if they ought to be tinkling as they moved.

The other side was adorned with a circle of Lombardy poplars, candle-slim and bright. Behind them the sunset sky was a miracle of colour, with rose-stained clouds adrift in a sea of pale-green sky.

How unutterably beautiful . . . but cloaking what? Up there Elvira would be waiting and a grandfather who had despised these children's mother. Janet's heart began to race.

Morgan slowed to take the curve and out from the poplars stepped a fine figure of a man in his late sixties. It couldn't be anyone but Thomas MacNee.

Morgan swung in over the rattling cattle-stops, halted the car and got out almost before it stopped. He grasped his uncle's outstretched hand and then put his arms round him. Well, why shouldn't he? The heir to Windrush Hill needn't be reserved with its master!

Morgan turned to summon them out with a gesture, but there was no need. The triplets were out, rushing upon him. Therese got there first, all eagerness, hair flying. Janet held herself braced for Therese's sake. Would he rebuff her, thinking her all Gallic impetuosity?

Thomas MacNee bent to her, caught her up, responded to her bear-hug and looked into her face searchingly. He let her slide down, put out a hand, gnarled and calloused, to each of the boys, welcoming them together.

"I'm Tommy."

"I'm Connal."

The old man looked keenly at the faces . . . Tommy's so like his son, Alasdair, at Connal's to see a boy so like his dead wife, Isabel, that it made him catch his breath. He could not believe it, though photographs had prepared him for a certain likeness. And this small granddaughter had his own brows, heavy in her small face. The next moment he was struggling against tears.

Janet, from her seat in the car, knew an uplift of the heart. She saw Thomas MacNee brush the moisture from the corners of his eyes, heard him say: "This is a big day for Windrush Hill ... its children have come home."

He gathered them about him, looked beyond them to the car, "But we're forgetting your Janet, Morgan." (Good heavens, this man, born in New Zealand, still retained a little of the brogue of his ancestors! He almost said: "Chanet.")

Thomas MacNee twinkled at Morgan, "Are you not glad I said bring a nurse with you?"

Morgan behaved exactly as any man might in such circumstances. I must be as convincing, Janet told herself, and got out, took Morgan's hand, and came towards Thomas MacNee.

He came to meet her halfway, held out both hands to her, then a look of faint surprise crossed his face, halting him briefly.

Morgan noticed it, laughed. "You're surprised there's so little of her, aren't you, Uncle? So was I at first— looks about seventeen, doesn't she? But she isn't. She's twenty-three. Janet MacGregor sounds such a doughty Scots body, doesn't she? But despite her looks she matches her name. She's pretty formidable. A no-nonsense sort, as you'll discover."

Thomas recovered from his surprise, said, with a glance from eyebrows that could only be described as beetling, "You'll think we're wild Colonials, rough in our manners, being frank like this, but never mind, you're one of the family now, so I daresay we've no need to stand on ceremony, lass. Come on now, give me a kiss?"

To her great surprise he put an arm round her and kissed her cheek. Janet's heart soared. Now, if only this Elvira wasn't as bad as painted!

"I think you'll be very pleased with the performance of the Holden, Uncle. Come on in the front seat with me. Janet won't mind. She's probably had more than enough of me on the way down."

Thomas would take that for teasing, of course.

The older man shook his head. "Not yet. I've something to tell you all first. And I'd rather get it out before we get into the car." He

seemed reluctant to bring it out, then heaved a sigh and said, "It's about the situation up at the house—Elvira."

Janet's heart descended again. Involuntarily, she glanced at Morgan. She saw him compress his lips.

Thomas addressed himself to her. As he met her eyes Janet knew that she was the stumbling-block, that Elvira's anger would be most bitter against her, the interloper, the girl who had won—to all intents—Morgan's love.

Thomas said: "I'm deeply ashamed that the moment you arrive you should be greeted wi' such a tale, that you have to learn that any New Zealander can be so malicious and ugly-minded. When first I decided to send for the bairns, Elvira was against it. Very much so. She's ruled the roost here ever since my wife died. She's been an excellent housekeeper, but it's never been a home since.

"But for her I realise now I might never have quarrelled with—but for her things might have gone differently years ago. From the time I decided to send for the children she's been working against it, trying to poison me against them. How much trouble they'll be, how different in their upbringing, sure I'll rue the day . . . and so on. She actually thought I'd give in, that I'd arrange for them to be sent to boarding-school in Scotland . . . my own flesh and blood!

"When the cable arrived announcing your engagement, the fat was really in the fire. From then on she evidently resolved to walk out on me, at the last possible moment, and to make it as awkward as she could! She's gone, just an hour ago, saying she'll consider coming back when Morgan is married and you're out of the house, Janet . . . but only if you take the children too, or I have them sent to boarding-school. I won't repeat what I said to her. But it wasn't till she was actually leaving the house that something she said

revealed what she'd done. She'd actually made up her mind, coldly, and with great cunning, that she'd make things so difficult for you, Janet, that you'd flop on the housekeeping.

"The pantry is completely bare. I couldn't believe it. For the last month she's been letting supplies run out. There isn't a bit of bread in the house—bar some rolls I bought two days ago in Gore, thinking they might keep fresh for the bairns because I remembered Cecile always missed them. Elvira was furious over that. She's smashed every jam-jar—they're lying in the dump in scores; also every jar of preserved fruit, and she's put walnut-shells in the flour, sand in the sugar, and poured tomato sauce on the big cheese. And while, to keep me unsuspecting, the downstairs rooms are in their usual order, the rooms I told her to prepare for you are under layers of dust and there's not a bed made up.

"I didn't take the car out and rush to Tapanui because there wasn't time to get there and back, and I couldna have you arrive without a welcome and walk in to find the house in such a state. It's the first time in all its history that Windrush Hill has no hospitality to offer."

He gazed at them with hurt eyes. Janet couldn't bear it. She stepped forward, said: "Will she come back?"

There was fire in the eyes now. "*She will not.* Ever. Not if she grovelled. I felt sick with shame, when I looked at her, that my house had ever harboured such a woman."

Jane suddenly felt—as well as looked—about seventeen, carefree and unafraid. She put her head back. "What a relief she's gone! I was terrified to meet her. We'll cope. What's wrong with stale rolls and eggs? You'll have plenty of eggs, won't you? That will do us

tonight, and tomorrow Morgan and I will get provisions in Tapanui."

He brought his brows down and looked at her from beneath them, his brown eyes keen. "It's a big house. I can't promise you help. It's practically impossible to get."

"The children are used to helping. It keeps them out of mischief. After their—I mean the last little while when they were with me in the district nurse's house they just had to. I couldn't do everything. Let's get going."

Still Thomas hesitated. "She knew it was a bad time to pick." There was real chagrin in his voice. "This tractor safety demonstration—it's to be a big affair. We've got the Minister of Agriculture coming, of course. But he wired me two days ago that as the Prime Minister is to be in the vicinity—well, near-vicinity—and has expressed a wish to see it—he's a farmer himself, of course—he'll be here for lunch! Elvira is the world's best cook—I'll hand her that. It would have meant nothing to her. She agreed, the sly devil, that she could manage fine. Timed things well, didn't she? I'll have to see if someone else will take the official party for lunch."

Janet closed her eyes for a moment. Not tomorrow but the next day! Less than a week after landing at Wellington she was to meet the Prime Minister! What a country! Land of opportunity, Morgan had said sarcastically.

She opened her eyes, looked straight at Thomas MacNee, saw how disappointed he was ... it was the highlight of his life to have his Prime Minister on his sheep-station, and now he was not going to be able to entertain him at his own table.

Janet smiled at him. In fact, she grinned. "We MacGregors are known for fighting back, aren't we, Thomas MacNee? And when was a MacGregor ever afraid of sharing what he had—however humble—with his King or his Prince? We've got one clear day. Let's make an effort. If we don't fly too high, if we make it a cold luncheon, I reckon we could make it."

Morgan looked astounded. "We MacGregors? What -"

His uncle's heavy-jowled face lit up, his eyes disappeared into slits of laughter. "You know your clans, I see . . . yes, the MacNees wear the MacGregor tartan. We'll be sib to each other all right." He glanced at the puzzled Morgan. "We're kinsfolk. Some of the clan kinship is very slight—but not among the MacGregors, eh? Do you know the reason for that, lassie?"

"Aye, I know the reason. We MacGregors were such bonnie fechtters, and so hated by many clans for our fighting, that no one who was not a genuine MacGregor ever claimed to be one."

Thomas looked at Morgan. "Well, lad, you've shown some sense at last. Picked the right one. Come on, let's get on with it. If the MacGregors all gang up, pity help folk like Elvira Hayton!"

Morgan opened the car door. "And pity help a poor lone Mackay too, perhaps." He was laughing.

Janet was thinking: Morgan had shown some sense *at last*. Did that mean Thomas MacNee had no time for Dallas Raymine either?

Windrush Hill was a fine estate, sizeable even by New Zealand standards, she guessed. She leaned forward and said to Thomas, "I thought you ran only sheep, but I see you've got cattle too. Aren't those Galloways?"

"Yes, they're fast gaining favour in New Zealand." His eye gleamed with pleasure. "You'd know them."

"Yes, I suppose it's natural they should be suitable for here—on these highlands. They're great grazers, aren't they? And not too choosy."

"Ideal for here. They actually improve the grazing for the sheep. They clean up the rank tussock growth in the gullies and allow sheep to use them. Before we used to have to burn off. They need so little feeding out. Oh, in September some of the cows work their way down and we give them some hay, but the rest maintain themselves well up the hills and gullies."

"I like Galloways too," piped up Therese. "No horns."

Her grandfather smiled at her. "It's all right, Therese. Even our house cows are dehorned. We play safe. And not only with cows. Farms aren't always safe places for children. We do our best to cut down on the risks. When this tractor show is over I'll take you round and point out the danger spots."

She beamed up at him, said, "If you'd rather call me Tessie, not Therese, you can, you know." She added anxiously, "Tessie's not too outlandish, is it? I mean it's quite like Jessie, which is very Scots."

He looked down on her, puzzled. Janet caught her breath. Now what? This was pathetic. Dallas had so implanted the idea that her grandfather would not like her French name that the poor kid, sorry that their arrival should have so upset Elvira and, consequently, his plans, was offering this as A. concession.

Her grandfather, nonplussed, said: "Which do you prefer yourself?"

"I don't mind, Granddad," she said politely.

Janet caught Morgan's eye in the mirror and realised he was a bit anxious too.

Thomas MacNee looked down on his small granddaughter and said: "Weren't you named after your mother's mother?"

Therese nodded.

"Then that's right and proper. You ought to be named after her. It's an old Scots custom. The first son is named after his father's father, the first daughter after her mother's mother . . . Therese."

Janet felt still more tension fall from her. Certainly it was too early yet to form an opinion. Thomas MacNee might yet live up to the reputation Cecile had credited him with, but at least at their first meeting he'd shown himself both fair and warmhearted.

Thomas smiled at Connal, "And you, of course, are named for the little son your grandmother and I lost."

Therese asked: "Will our Aunt Meg come to see us? She doesn't live here, does she?"

"No, she married a professor who's at Victoria University in Wellington, but they're in the United States at the moment. They'll be there till next year. She'll be dying to see you. They have no family. We'll fly up for a holiday when they come back. She's nearly always down for Christmas, but won't be this year, of course. They'll get back late February."

The drive disappeared over a shoulder of the hill, then swung round to a full view of the house sitting on its hilltop. No wonder they called it Windrush Hill.

It was utterly charming, set in a lovely garden with a background of English and native trees richly blended, the autumn colourings setting off the greens of native ones. It was built on a succession of terraces bright with flowers and berries, and was recognisable as a pioneer house, old for this country.

"Yes, over a hundred years old . . . one of the first houses in the district. Fortunately, they used good wood. It was pit-sawn timber."

"What's pit-sawn?" That was Connal.

"There were no mills in those days, son. Trees were placed across a pit and they were sawn into planks by hand."

The house was painted white, it had steep gables and dormer windows and a green, corrugated iron roof.

"We had to put iron over it. The original roof was wooden shingles, but they're too hard to get now. Because it was wooden shingled, it has a cast steel ceiling in the sitting-room, to turn the leaks. There aren't many of them in existence now."

"Silver . . . like a sink?"

"No, Therese. It's white-painted and fancy, just like a plaster ceiling. It's got little squares all over it and fleurs-de-lys."

There was a long veranda, facing the sun, but glassed-in, and all the windows were small-paned, like Georgian ones. The garden crowded it lovingly, and it looked as if a wing ran off at the back that might have been added at a different time.

"The rooms are small—Thomas seemed to be reading her thoughts—"they were in those days, so for entertaining we added

an L, with a really large dining-room and beyond it a room that can be used for dancing. It's not been used much since Alasdair and Meg went away."

Pandemonium broke out among the dogs. Old Thomas was laughing. "Your Rory leads the chorus, Morgan, I'll go let him off."

He did, moving as quickly as a man of thirty. There was a tan streak across the yard and a sheepdog hurled itself on Morgan, almost hysterical with delight.

Janet turned hastily away because Morgan's eyes were suspiciously bright, and there were so many things she didn't dare to admire about him. It made it just that much harder.

They went in the front door. Janet guessed it wasn't often used by the family, but Thomas wanted them to get things in right perspective, she realised.

Oh dear, it would be hard not to love Windrush Hill. And love it too dearly she must not. In a couple of months at the outside; when they got settled with a housekeeper, she and Morgan would stage their quarrel and she would have to find work elsewhere.

It was such a tasteful blend of the old and the new. She saw fitted modern carpets, heavily felted and easy on the feet. They were in soft colourings that matched the age of the house. The pictures had heavy, old-fashioned frames and Highland scenes mingled with family portraits. An elegant white spindled staircase led up from the hall. All the woodwork was painted white. It had a miniature, doll's-house air.

They went through to the kitchen. It was long and once had run the whole length of the house. "They didn't believe in saving the

women's legs in those days," said Grandfather. "I divided it into three before I brought Isabel here as a bride. The kitchen end is still big enough to sit a crowd of shearers down—the section in the middle we use as a living-room. You get a glimpse of the sea from it, mighty far away, but still a glimpse. And t'other end was what they'd call nowadays a rumpus room, no doubt. We called it the play-room. That can be your domain, children."

The three children stood stock-still in the doorway as he flung open the door. "Many's the time Elvira wanted to clear it all out, but I put my foot down. It's as the bairns left it. Some things, no doubt, will tie up with your own hobbies. You can change this room round all you like. The one stipulation is that you keep it clean. I won't worry if it's untidy. Sometimes you'll want to set up a meccano set or the Hornby train and willna want to put it away, but you canna expect Janet to clean up a room wi' bits and pieces everywhere. So it's over to the three of you—not just Therese, mind—to give it a thorough do-out on Saturday mornings."

The children, looking angelic, chorused that they would. Janet approved. Her feelings were all topsy-turvy. Nothing was what she had expected it to be. He wouldn't be soft with them, this grandfather of theirs, but beneath his firmness was toleration. And, despite what the free-expressionist school vowed, children liked rules and regulations. They knew where they were with them.

Half an hour ago she'd been feeling deadly tired, a little heady with the long journey, a sick feeling in her stomach because of her dread of Elvira. Now she was reviving.

It was a challenge, and she'd far rather have to cope with dusty bedrooms, unmade beds and an empty larder than hostility and resentment.

By tomorrow morning she might even feel she could cope with a Prime Minister!

"Let's get at it," she said, smiling at Mr. MacNee in a conspiratorial manner. "Let's show this Elvira we're not downhearted. I think if the children can just wash downstairs and we can put a meal on—of sorts—we'll all feel better. If we let them get away upstairs exploring, deciding which rooms they want, we'll never eat. Now you said there were eggs. Eggs and the rolls, do you think?"

Thomas, still smarting with humiliation, said: "There's no butter, not as much as a bit of dripping or bacon in the house. My rolls of bacon are all in the dump."

Morgan said furiously: "We ought to prosecute Elvira. She's banking on your being too proud to do so. I hate her to get away with this."

"That won't solve the problem of what to have for tonight's meal," said Thomas.

All of a sudden Janet laughed. "At least she couldn't stop the hens laying—or the taps from running! We'll poach the eggs, or scramble them. There'll be plenty of milk? And don't you make your own butter?"

He shook his head. "It's not worth while, butter's so cheap. The Government subsidise it. We get more for butter-fat than we pay for butter; even though a pound of butter-fat makes a pound and a quarter of butter, it still doesn't pay farmers' wives to make it."

Morgan laughed at the look on Janet's face. "She thinks this Down-Under land is a Topsy-Turvy one too. We're quaint folk, my Janet."

She shrugged. "Is there any cream separated? A bit old? I mean if it's thick enough it's easy to beat into butter with an egg-beater—and wash it through muslin and squeeze it. The children would love to do that— they can have turns. And if we do some potatoes— there's bound to be potatoes in the barn, I suppose—it will spin out the rolls. I take it Elvira didn't throw them out?"

"No. She was so cross about them, said she could see my grandchildren were going to be spoilt from the word go, that I rather suspected that in a fit of temper she might throw them out, so I put them in a couple of preserving jars and hid them in my desk. Never in the mind of man did I imagine she'd throw everything else out. It beats cockfighting!"

He added: "I lit the old range, thought it'd keep the kitchen warm, but you'll find it easier to cook on the electric stove."

One look at the electric range which was a mass of automatic gadgets scared the life out of Janet, so she decided the range would do her. They'd only need to use the top and it was glowingly hot. She bent to the cupboard before she even flung off her jacket, took out a large pan, filled it with water and put it on the stove, flicked up the salt-box lid on the lower shelf of the old-fashioned mantelpiece and found it empty!

Fury rose in her. She put her hands on her hips and said through her teeth, "If that woman was here right now, I'd—I'd skin her! Eggs and potatoes without *salt!*"

Morgan burst out laughing. "The redoubtable Miss MacGregor! Elvira is twice your size, my love!"

Janet glared at him. "And don't call me -" She stopped. That was the sort of thing she couldn't say in front of an audience who

naturally supposed he loved her. She finished lamely: "And don't call me your love at a moment like this!"

They all laughed. Thomas said, "Aye, she's right. A time and a season for all things. Just a moment. I wonder if -"

He broke off to scoot down the hall, came back a moment later bearing some silver salt-and-pepper shakers, a look of triumph on his face.

"When she emptied the shakers in common use she must have forgotten these. They were in a china cupboard in the sitting-room, done up in green baize bags. A piece of luck!"

Morgan went off to the shed for potatoes, for the storeroom vegetable racks were bare as could be.

"But I'm afraid we'll have to drink milk with it." Thomas's face was a study. "That vile woman hasn't left a spoonful of tea."

Just as Morgan returned, the triplets shouted at once, supreme triumph in their voices, "We've got tea with us!"

The two men looked bewildered. "Why on earth would you bring tea with you?"

Janet laughed. "I'll call a thousand blessings down on Hetty Sinclair after all! She seemed to think we were going to come out on the primitive conditions of ships of long ago. She was convinced that though we'd get three square meals a day, we'd never get elevenses. Her aunt came out here about nineteen-eleven or so and took a teapot with her and a tin of biscuits. So Hetty's parting present to us was the same. Goodness, I forgot! The biscuits are there too, still unopened. They're a fancy lot by the label—what a pity. Had they been plain we could have had them

for breakfast. Just imagine, if Morgan hadn't picked up that station wagon, we'd have had the luggage sent on later. What incredible luck! I wonder if Hetty made her sister the same present— she's got a sister in Oamaru, who came out as a war-bride many years ago."

They sat down to quite an appetising meal. Janet still had a tea-towel tied over her tweeds with a piece of string. Something about the whole thing appealed to the triplets. What an adventure . . . circumventing the enemy! Also, they couldn't be banished to bed too soon because their rooms had to be made ready.

Janet saw their spirits rising with great misgiving. It was strange how the moment children got a meal, it revitalised them, while grown-ups continued tired.

"I suppose," said Therese, in tones of deepest gloom, "there's no chance of porridge for breakfast?"

Her grandfather's eyes creased at the corners. "D'ye tell me you're a great hand for porridge? Why, I'd ha' thought with being on the Continent so much it'd been rolls and cherry jam you'd be wanting, and nothing else."

Therese said solemnly, "I never feel I start the day right without porridge."

"You'll do me," said her grandfather. "How do you like it? Plenty of sugar?"

Therese looked scornful. "No. I have it with salt and milk."

Thomas's slow smile spread all over his face. "Or cream?"

"Cream when I can get it, Granddad, but we couldn't always afford it."

"You're a real MacNee, I can see that."

The boys exchanged glances, cleared their throats. Connal was spokesman. "*We* like sugar."

He twinkled, exchanged a look with Therese and said sadly, shaking his pow, "Degenerate lot, aren't they, lassie, these brothers of yours? Sassenachs and infidels!"

Therese beamed on him. She turned to Janet, said, "See, he uses big words too. But nobody laughs at him!"

"That's one of the few privileges of growing up, Tess," said Janet.

Thomas turned to the boys. "You can have what you fancy, but Therese and I will eat our oatmeal the way it ought to be eaten."

"But I presume Elvira will have thrown out the oatmeal too?"

"No, Janet, but she treated it as she did the flour . . . put walnut shells in it."

A gleam lit Janet's eye. "We could sieve the shells out—that would be porridge and eggs for breakfast and two rolls between six of us. That's all that's left." Suddenly they were all laughing helplessly. It did them good.

"We're too far from neighbours to borrow," said Grandfather, "and I dinna care for it, at that. I may explain to them later—when I've got over it. As it is, the store will wonder at the size of the order."

"Oatmeal," said Janet reflectively. "I could make oatcakes. We could eat that to our breakfast eggs."

Thomas said regretfully, "No baking-powder. It's all gone . . . even essences and spices."

"I don't need baking-powder, but I suppose there's no soda either."

Morgan muttered something and went away to return looking smug.

"I just remembered there has always been baking-soda in the medicine chest for burns."

Janet said, beaming on him in a quite fond manner, "That wasn't just memory, Morgan, but sheer inspiration. Oatcakes will be miles better than eating eggs with vanilla wafers or chocolate fingers. I'll make them after we get the children to bed."

Upstairs she found a fair warren of bedrooms, some with dormer windows.

To their intense delight the boys found that for the first time in their lives they could have a room each. This far eclipsed any minor drawbacks such as dust. They chose a pair that communicated—both with windows that looked right into the machinery yard. Or so Morgan said, but it was too dark by now to see. This, they felt, was the best of all possible views.

Thomas, his eyes holding Janet's, said, "Elvira had the airiest, biggest bedroom. Would you like it? Or would you prefer the spare?"

"The spare," she replied promptly. "I don't want her haunting my dreams."

"And there's a wee one off the spare—we found it handy for guests with a child. It had a sloping roof and a tiny window-seat, Therese. Would you like that? Or a dormer one next to the boys?"

"The one off Janet's. I get nightmares."

"Right. There'll not be much room for dolls and things, but you've got the playroom downstairs for those, anyway. Meg's dolls are still there, you'd notice."

Janet said: "Therese is almost rocking on her feet. I'll make up her bed and the boys' right away."

"I'll make the boys' beds," offered Morgan. "The sheets and things are in this cupboard along the hall." He flung open the door and out on to the dusty floor tumbled a huge pile of crumpled-up linen. Elvira had shaken them out of their folds and crammed them back in.

Janet got a sight of Thomas's face and said hastily: "It doesn't matter. There's no time to iron them. What do creases matter? I'm so thankful to be at journey's end I could sleep on bracken!"

Thomas MacNee turned and stalked off downstairs without another word.

Morgan said slowly, "Let him get over it. Windrush Hill has always been noted for its hospitality. This has hit him hard. Come on, boys, you can give me a hand. Then it's a case of quick baths and bed. You can read for a bit if you can stay awake."

Therese helped Janet make her bed in the charming attic, tiny, but when clean it would be all that a little girl might dream of, with its latticed windows, its miniature chests of drawers, a paper patterned

with dream-castles and a three-cornered glass cupboard with little china figures in it.

When she was making her own bed, she noticed Therese had disappeared. She felt a little worried. Old Thomas . . . no, she mustn't call him that, he was by no means old . . . had evidently wanted to be on his own for a bit. And when you weren't used to children a little of them went a long way. She'd slip quietly down and bring Therese back. Time she had her bath, anyway.

Janet thought longingly of her own bath and bed as she crept quietly down. There were those oatcakes to make, and never had she felt less like baking . . . but everyone would be hungry come morning. It seemed a week since her last sleep.

She came through the living-room section of the old kitchen and looked through the muslin-screened curtains of the glass door into the kitchen proper. Therese, a tea-towel pinned to her, was washing the dishes. As Janet looked and listened, she heard Therese say reprovingly: "Grandfather, we aren't allowed to dry more than one plate at a time. When you dry several together they're apt to get chipped. Don't let Janet catch you doing that."

He took her very seriously. "My goodness, I see I'll have to watch my p's and q's! She'd be dead right too. My mother used to say that was making lazy man's haste. I won't do it again. I can see Janet was brought up in the good old-fashioned way."

Janet thought, a twist at her heart, Yet had I not come here under false colours, he'd have refused to have me in the house.

But at least she need not worry about Therese and her grandfather. They were kindred spirits.

She went upstairs again. Morgan seemed to be supervising the bathing. A wave of infinite regret washed over her that it had been impossible to meet either of them on open ground. When Dallas Raymine wasn't around to remind her of Morgan's clandestine attachment to her, she liked him almost as much as she had done in those few enchanted days before Curacao. *Almost*. A good thing she had found him out before she got in too deeply. Because, with nothing to feed upon, this . . . this . . . this feeling for him would die a natural death. It had to.

Meanwhile, nothing mattered. Not even personal relationships—till the day after tomorrow was gone and the Prime Minister and his official party were lunched as befitted the reputation of Windrush Hill.

By the time she and Morgan had got the boys settled and as many of their things unpacked as they needed, and came downstairs together, she guessed Thomas and his granddaughter would have the dishes finished and Therese would be talking his head off.

As they came to the glass door they paused, by mutual consent, as Janet had done earlier.

Thomas was sitting in the old rocker by the stove, and Therese was on his knee, her head on his shoulder, fast asleep. His chin was on her tawny hair.

Thomas looked up and saw them. They went in.

He looked down on the sleeping child. "Pity to insist on that bath, don't you think? It will wake her up too much." He rose with her.

Morgan held out his arms. "I'll carry her up, Uncle Thomas."

Thomas shook his grizzled head. "No, I'll carry my wee granddaughter up myself. It's a gey long time since I did anything of the kind."

Janet followed him. She had the bed turned down, the crumpled sheets smoothed as much as possible. Thomas MacNee laid the child down tenderly, removed the little buttoned shoes.

He touched one cheek with his finger, left the rest to Janet and went into the boys' room to say good night to them.

She made the oatcakes, and while they were baking Morgan made the supper—tea and the despised sweet biscuits all the way from Scotland. But both men eyed the crumbly oatcakes hungrily and finally had some hot, with the home-made butter spread thickly.

Thomas said, his elbows on the table, and looking now every year of his age, "Lassie, I think you'll have to give up the idea of preparing that lunch. You'll kill yourself. I'll sink my pride and ring up half a dozen neighbours. They'll rally round. Half of them have deep-freezes with wild pork and venison and poultry in them. And they'll slap up a few sponges and cakes."

Janet considered it. Then she smiled. "I *am* tired at the moment:. But I'm so used to short rations of sleep. Midwifery is like that, you know. I rise up like a giant refreshed after a few hours. If Elvira is in the district, as you suspect, I'd hate her to think we couldn't cope, that she really did put a spanner in the works.

"Perhaps it's not the most admirable trait, but I've got my back up about it. If you could help me tomorrow morning I'd do all I could. I'm afraid we'll have to leave the dust and dirt and unpacking upstairs till after the tractor demonstration day, but if Morgan could tear off tomorrow morning with the station wagon for

provisions, I think we could turn on an adequate lunch the next day, if not a sumptuous one. There'll be a butcher, won't there?"

Thomas's eyes flickered to Morgan's. "I'd like to have been able to say everything's grown on Windrush Hill, but I suppose butcher's meat is all we could manage in the time."

Morgan said: "Uncle, if you want it that way, we'll make it. I'll get up at five and kill a couple of lambs and a porker. It will be a bit fresh-killed, but we'll risk it. Could we cook the meat tomorrow night, Janet? There's the electric oven, and you'll note that the range is a double oven affair. We've still got some lettuces, I suppose, or shall I get them in Tapanui?"

"No, there's plenty. Under cloches for shelter. And carrots and beetroot. And loads of tomatoes in the glasshouse."

Janet said: "I love making mixed salads. And I won't get in such a flap as I would with hot vegetables and roasts. I won't have time for fancy cakes, but I could manage scones and oatcakes, if I make them first thing the morning of the big day."

The sparkle came back in Thomas's eye. "I'd sooner have them—real Scots fare. Pioneer stuff."

They talked on, planning, till suddenly Janet's head began to nod. Thomas rose, said, "Well, I'm for bed. It's been one hell of a day, but thanks to you we're going to manage, lassie. Morgan's developed discrimination with regard to women, at last. So he ought—at thirty. Good night, you two. Don't be keeping that lass too long out of bed, Morgan."

Off he went.

Morgan laughed and came round to her. "He's right. You're for bed immediately, Janet. You're our one hope."

She was drowsy almost to the point of dropping and staggered when she got up. Morgan steadied her.

She was too bemused to know what he was doing till she felt his lips on her cheeks. She lifted a limp hand against his chest and tried to push. She said in a tone of utter weariness, "That's not at all necessary. Thomas is away upstairs. You don't have to bother."

He laughed outright at that. "Oh, it was no bother. I quite enjoyed it."

She gave an exasperated sigh. "Well, you ought not to have enjoyed it. I don't mean a thing to you, and if there's one thing I hate it's meaningless kisses."

"Janet, I refuse to fight with you." She looked up. His hazel-green eyes were brimming with mischief. "Not till the next two days are over, anyway!"

Her indignation overcame her tiredness. "Because even against your will you have to make use of me, haven't you?"

"Well, didn't you make use of me, first?"

"Yes, Morgan. Both hoist with our own petards, aren't we? So we must make the best of things. But it doesn't include kisses. Because if you can enjoy those under these circumstances, I certainly can't."

As Janet drifted off to sleep she realised unwillingly that if that were true, how strange that she could still feel his kiss.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THERE certainly was no time for backchat the next day. There were times when Janet felt she had been too ambitious, but every time she got that way and felt she'd just have to sit down, the sight of Thomas MacNee's boyish eagerness carried her on.

The children thought it great fun. They fed the fowls . . . "We call them hens," they said. They gathered late cooking apples, peeled and sliced them in vast quantities and stewed them, ready to be heated for the pies. They pulled rhubarb, washed and chopped it. Therese, with an importantly feminine air of superiority, even rubbed the butter into flour and sugar for the topping for the rhubarb crunch.

"You see, you can make that the day before, not like the pies, and just heat it up. That gives us two hot puddings. Connal, you can make the jellies. And for goodness' sake, keep an eye on them setting and whip some condensed milk into some when it starts to jell, and insert halved pears into the red jelly and chopped bananas into the green ... no, don't peel the bananas till the jelly is beginning to set."

She had been terrified she'd forget something vital from the huge order she'd written for Morgan to take to Tapanui, but her lucky stars had been above her.

She even managed a big batch of shortbread, thankful Morgan had managed to get the ground rice she preferred to cornflour for it.

"Therese, those new tartan hair-ribbons you've not worn. Cut them into four lengths and tie some really good bows and iron them flat. We can decorate the shortbread plates with them. And slip some of that heather we brought into the centre knots."

Janet sat down for five minutes, refreshed herself with a cup of coffee, and was spurred to further effort by the sight of Thomas wielding the Hoover in the dining-room. She caught up a duster and followed him round.

"I must leave myself a bit of time to do the flowers. Those chrysanthemums are glorious and so easy to arrange. I shan't be able to spend much time on them. Oh dear, I've made mint sauce for the lamb, but I've forgotten the apple sauce for the pork. You do serve it with cold pork here, I suppose? And I must put gelatine to soak for the beetroot."

"Dinna worry about jelling it. Serve it plain, lassie, you'll kill yourself."

"Well, it's just that it makes less mess if anyone drops a bit off the server."

He chuckled. "Trust a woman to think o' that!" His face suddenly took on an expression of horror.

Janet said, "What's the matter?"

"I was just wondering about the downstairs linen-cupboard. If Elvira did that to the bed-linen she may have -" He left the dining-room to rush into the hall. Janet followed him. They looked aghast at what the opened door revealed.

She'd really made a job of this. Tablecloths, afternoon teacloths, tray sets, table-napkins were screwed into the tightest of balls, making it impossible, with the starch in them, for them to be easily ironed out.

Janet supposed that Thomas restrained his language simply because of her and the children, but she saw the veins in his

temples and throat stand out, and felt it was a pity he couldn't let fly.

She touched his arm. "Mr. MacNee, let's not allow this to upset us too much. I mean if we get into too much of an adrenalin mood, we're going to be correspondingly tired tomorrow. And we must be on our top form then. I'll take these out to the kitchen table, sprinkle them well with hot water and roll them tightly. By tonight they'll iron perfectly. We'll need three really large cloths—you're having three tables, aren't you? And we'd better have one spare, in case we spill anything at the last moment." She was shaking them out and examining them as she spoke.

"These are really beautiful. What about those two linen damask ones that match for the two side tables and that one with the drawn-thread work for the V.I.P. table?"

Thomas said slowly, "That's about a hundred and fifty years old. It's always been used for special occasions here. One of the MacNee women, all that time ago, married an Irishman and came back to Scotland after she was widowed, with her five children—and some Irish linen. Puir woman, she lost three of those five children in a week with a cholera epidemic. That's how long ago it was. And to think Elvira -" He broke off as Morgan came in. They explained.

He said: "Tell you what might help . . . there are more than enough paper napkins to spare from the shed luncheon, provided for the savouries. We could use them."

"Savouries? Shed luncheon? Morgan, what do you mean?"

He burst out laughing. "It's okay, Janet. That lot's nothing to do with you. It's general practice when there's a do on like this, that every man who comes brings a plate of food. We've a copper and

an urn down at the wool-shed—it's often used for a barn dance, you understand, and the nearest neighbours' wives attend to making the tea. I'll fill the copper tonight and put big rolls of newsprint on the trestle tables. They just take it buffet fashion. They bring cups from the Community Centre."

Janet felt weak with relief. It made her say sturdily: "But *we'll* use linen napkins. I'm determined."

She thought of something. "Neighbours' wives! Does that mean Dallas will help?"

Thomas MacNee gave a snort. "Can you imagine it? No, Mrs. Arnold Raymine will flutter round talking to as many V.I.P.s as she can manage. What Arnold Raymine was thinking about is beyond me! Though -"

He stopped dead. But that philosophical "Though" had revealed enough to Janet. It meant he was pleased Dallas had married Arnold and not *his* nephew. Evidently; for all his seeming kindness, Thomas was very much head of the clan when it came to his kinsmen marrying. He'd probably spoken his mind very forcibly when he had found Morgan was in love with Dallas.

But when did a man worth his salt ever give in to opposition in the matter of the woman he loved? Was Morgan the type? Janet's thoughts went racing as she shook out napkin after napkin.

How had he lost Dallas to Arnold? Suddenly she thought of his house. A man wouldn't build a house till he was sure of the woman he loved. Till she was his affianced wife. Then what had happened? Could his uncle's evident disapproval have influenced him?

Last night when Janet had been too sleepy to take it in fully, Thomas had said, "Morgan's developed discrimination with women—at last." Or something like that.

Suddenly Janet knew what must have influenced him.

He had begun to build his house on Windrush Hill land. He was, after all, working for his uncle, knowing that in time and in the natural course of events, he would probably fall heir to it. Perhaps the daughter would get a share in it, but the professor husband wouldn't work it. Maybe after all, despite his seeming warm-heartedness, Thomas MacNee paid the piper and called the tune . . . and rather than lose the chance of a lifetime, Morgan had given Dallas up.

Or—to be entirely fair to Morgan—had the old man threatened that, knowing Dallas would refuse to marry anyone who would be disinherited and remain nothing but a glorified farm labourer?

Janet felt she had come nearer the truth. No wonder, then, that Morgan was a little bitter towards women in general—and to herself in particular.

Yet surely, now that Dallas was married to Arnold, Morgan Mackay ought to accept it and discipline himself. Easy to decide what other people ought or ought not to do, though. And there were women who burned like a fever in the blood of men.

Janet picked up the last of the napkins and sped towards the kitchen.

"She's made of the right stuff, that one," said Thomas to Morgan. "I'll be proud to have her for my niece. When do you think you'll wed?"

Morgan said hurriedly: "Well, we have to get settled with a housekeeper to look after the triplets before we can make plans, Uncle. It's not fair to the kids to make any more changes quickly."

"Och, don't talk that way in front of Janet. I might not be filled up with this new-fangled psychology, but I do know a thing or two about women. Ye'd be better far to appear impatient for your bride, man. After all, there's plenty of room at Windrush Hill. You could all bide here for a year or so till we get things straight—and y'ou could decorate and furnish Skyreach at your leisure, then."

Morgan laughed. "Look here, we're not all the Lochinvar type that you were, Uncle, swooping down on your bride on a trip Home and bringing your Isabel back here before she'd time to get her breath. For goodness' sake let's get this tractor demonstration day over before we start thinking about wedding breakfasts!"

"Well, when you do name the day, lad, we'll have the breakfast here. I like the old-time-style weddings in the homesteads. We could get some caterers from Gore to do it."

Morgan scooped up the tablecloths and followed his uncle, laughing.

Janet was staggered when she learned that Thomas wanted the triplets at the centre table. "Look, they can just have a snack at the kitchen table, Mr. MacNee."

He raised the beetling eyebrows. "Ye'd better make it Uncle Thomas, same as Morgan. It'll be no time, anyway, before I'm your uncle in very truth. Might as well start as we'll end. Keep and save us, lassie, what a one you are for blushing! What's wrong with that?"

Morgan laughed. What an actor he was! He pinched her cheek. "Better give in, my love. We're a casual crowd at best, we Kiwis, make it Uncle Thomas."

Thomas said: "I must have my grandchildren at my table. It's their rightful place. I'll ring up the McNeurs and get Mrs. Mac and her Phyllis to serve—you can get it ready to serving point, so you and Morgan can sit down too. The salads and beetroot will be on the tables and there'll just be the potatoes and peas to serve. Morgan will carve the meat long before anyone arrives, and it can go in the refrigerator sliced under polythene. I don't want too much formality."

Janet said imploringly: "I'd rather not sit down with you all, Uncle Thomas. Keep it a family affair. I'll do the serving. And—will you mind?—I've looked out enough dishes to place an individual salad in front of everyone's place. It saves a terrific lot of time. And you can arrange it so much more attractively. Therese is very good at arranging salads. She has a continental flair for it."

Morgan said firmly; "Janet will be happier that way, sir. She and I will wait on the tables. Now, Janet, no more to be said. It's Uncle's day, and you and I will be just in the background. It's very fitting for the triplets, newly restored to their grandfather and his direct descendants, to be with him at his table."

It was all very puzzling. Morgan Mackay did not bear himself as one in fear of being dispossessed. It was almost unnatural for him to be so completely unresentful. Windrush Hill had belonged to *his* forebears too. But by the time the end of the achingly busy day came, the only problem left in Janet's mind was how many potatoes the triplets must peel the next morning. When this event was over, she would sleep for a week.

Morgan had tried to get her to bed at least an hour earlier than she had managed it, but she'd persuaded him that she wouldn't sleep a wink if she didn't get the flowers done.

"They're a time-consuming task and there won't be a moment tomorrow." She did it in the laundry and wasn't too ambitious.

The flowers were simply arranged. Great urns of chrysanthemums and autumn leaves, a few late roses and scabious . . . which she said was a horrible name and she preferred to call them ladies' pincushions. . . filled half a dozen holders; dry heads of hydrangeas that had turned glorious shades of red and copper and green with the approach of winter provided more and, under some shrubs, she had been enchanted to find some polyanthus blooming under the impression this was spring.

"That was because we had such a wet autumn," said Thomas.

Janet filled shallow troughs with them for the dinner-tables. Men hated high vases at meal-times; and she kept some virginia creeper leaves aside. These could put them in trailing sprays across the corners of the white tablecloths just before the meal was announced.

As Janet got into bed, a haven that was to be hers for too short a time by far, she reflected that New Zealand might be a land of opportunity, but it was still more a land of hard labour! *She* couldn't remember ever *feeling* more tired. Even her bones seemed aching.

The next morning there was no time to think about aches. Even though Janet was up before light, Morgan had the range stoked and the electric oven hot. A good thing he knew how to work those gadgets. It would be a pleasure to experiment with it when failure wouldn't be catastrophic as it would be today. Every time it flashed

upon Janet that she was actually cooking for the Prime Minister, she felt sick.

Morgan made the breakfast while she made the pastry and topped the pies. Once the puddings were off her mind she would feel easier. Fortunately, the triplets slept till called. There was no doubt you worked faster when you had no questions to answer. Janet got a huge batch of scones in and sat down to her own breakfast. The triplets arrived, looking scantily washed.

"I hand it to you, Morgan, you're well house-trained," Janet said.

"Aye," said Thomas, "he'll make a good husband. Men need to be handy away up here where you canna get domestic help for love nor money. There's always a time when a woman needs a hand—when babies are young particularly—so it's just as well to train them young."

This time Janet managed to keep her colour down, even when Therese, suddenly enchanted with a new idea, said: "I never thought about babies! *Won't* it be lovely? They'll be our cousins, won't they? Or don't steps count?"

Fortunately, Thomas was serving Connal with bacon —bought bacon—and couldn't have noticed. Morgan said hurriedly, "Of course they'll be your cousins—I'm your cousin, aren't I? They'll be your cousins about twice removed."

Tommy said, "We'll be a big family soon, we seem to be adding people all the time. You seemed so far away, Grandfather, when we were in Scotland. Sort of unreal. We only had Janet, now we've got Morgan and soon -"

Janet said severely, "Tommy and Therese, you're talking far too much. Do get on with your breakfast, the sooner these dishes are

washed up the happier I'll feel. Then you can make your beds and your grandfather's and Morgan's and mine. That's one each extra. Tomorrow we'll start unpacking in real earnest and clean up the top floor. All I can say is, thank goodness there's a bathroom downstairs. And for St. Andrew's sake, keep all the V.I.P.s safely down below. No one get carried away with showing them the views from above. Oh, heavens, my scones!"

Abashed, the triplets ate up.

Janet whipped the scones from their trays into some baskets she had found and lined with clean flour-bags—the only things Elvira had left uncrumpled. There had been no time to iron tea-towels for that.

Morgan began on the dishes and started the potatoes, rounding up the children to help. Janet went on steadily whipping cream, inspecting jellies, setting the tables. At least Elvira had done nothing to the glassware and the silver was beautifully kept. Even washing that quantity of lettuce was going to take time, and grating cheese and carrot was fiddling, to say nothing of shelling hard-boiled eggs. Though the youngsters liked that.

Mrs. McNeur and her Phyllis arrived soon, came in and exclaimed with great sincerity over the beautiful way the tables were set, at the amount of food already piled in the kitchen.

"Well, Morgan, aren't you the lucky man! Aren't you glad you took that trip Home? When I heard what Elvira had done—just half an hour ago—I was furious. Not but what Windrush Hill'll be a happier place without her. I fair shook for these children when I saw the way she carried on about them coming. I just hope she gets clean out of the district. She's over to Richardsons'. But, although Minna Richardson's fairly friendly with her, Elvira's one

who wears out her welcome mighty quick. And when Minna hears what she's been up to—no doubt when she arrived she told a pack of lies—she'll be glad to see the back of her. But I mustn't talk. I'll take the milk, Morgan, and get away up to the woolshed. I just wish Elvira could ha' seen this spread. She'd have an apoplexy. Janet—you don't mind me calling you Janet, do you? You're such a slip of a thing you look no older than my Phyllis—we'll get to know each other when all this to-do is over. I mustn't hold you up now."

There were dozens of cars there by ten-thirty, but the official party wasn't arriving till eleven. They'd be given cups of tea as they watched, the same as the rest of the spectators, served by the women of the district. Thomas had said to aim for dinner by one, but if Janet wasn't quite ready by then to let him know, and another demonstration could go on.

Janet determined to be up to time and flew round so fast she actually had some to spare. She slipped outside and picked a few more virginia creeper sprays. She would hang them in a wall-vase on the dining-room wall.

She had changed into one of her spotless white overalls. Her morning one had become limp and soiled.

She was right up against the wall of the playroom when she heard voices. One was Therese's. Heavens, that child was doing the honours! How quickly children adapt themselves. Trust Therese. She'd probably found some man who liked children and had latched on to him.

She listened smiling.

Therese said: "I've always noticed men are as fond of trains as little boys are. Our stepfather was always playing with Connal's

and Tommy's. So I thought you'd be interested in this very old model. Just feel the weight of that carriage! Of course, you don't get workmanship like that these days, do you?"

There was a suspicion of a tremor in the pleasant voice that answered her. "I'm afraid you don't—which is a great pity. These tradesmen loved their work. It's most important to like what you're doing. More important really than doing what you like."

Well, at least this strange man was taking Therese seriously. She'd love it. Probably it was some kindly neighbour. Children loved to be talked to on a man-to-man basis, not down to.

She slid the window up, said, "Therese?" Then she nodded to the man with the Hornby carriage in his hand and said, "How do you do. I'm the children's nanny. Do you mind if I interrupt to give this little girl a message for her grandfather?"

"Not at all. Go ahead ... I believe it's been a very big day for you, so soon after your arrival from Scotland. We're all tremendously impressed with what you've accomplished."

Janet's cheeks flushed with pleasure. "Thank you, I'm glad we could help out. I'm only sorry it was so upsetting for Mr. MacNee. It's his big day, entertaining his Prime Minister. Therese, would you tell your grandfather that I can serve the dinner any time he wants it, but I can also keep it hot till he's ready to come, if it suits him better. And, Therese, while I think of it, I should say to you that it's extremely good of your grandfather to want you three at the table, but do remember that this is one of the occasions when children should be seen and not heard.

"Your grandfather won't want the Prime Minister to know the wheels haven't been running exactly smoothly before his arrival, so lie low and say nuffin. In fact, the thing you must especially

remember, if the Prime Minister *is* good enough to address a word or two to you, is to make your answer polite but not long-winded. Whatever happens don't take control of the conversation or use long words you don't understand!"

Therese looked her straight in the eye with her butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth expression. That always made Janet uneasy. But all she said was: "Janet, this is a very casual country. Morgan said so. And I have reason to believe the Prime Minister is extremely approachable."

Janet thought the man with the train choked a little as he turned aside and examined a meccano model. No wonder!

"All the more reason," said Janet severely, "for not taking advantage of him. Now remember! And give your grandfather that message as soon as you get back to the field—paddock."

"Come on, Therese." Therese's new friend held out his hand, she put hers into it and skipped out blithely beside him. Janet heard him add, "Because if you aren't starving, I am."

Morgan came down immediately, his eye approving everything.

Janet said, a little breathlessly, "I feel a little weak at the knees, and I really would be happier if I had those triplets right here in the kitchen, under my nose. Especially Therese."

"They'll be jake, Janet. Children always rise to the occasion. They're on their honour. They won't let their grandfather down." He chuckled. "I always remember the instructions Mother used to give us when we went off to a party or to someone else's for tea. Anne— my sister—got tired of this once and said impatiently: 'Oh, we always behave *away from home*? It's true enough."

They heard Thomas MacNee leading his guests in. Janet's pulses immediately steadied. Just like the moment in the theatre before an operation. They could see the guests filing in through the net curtains of the double glass doors. Morgan was standing ready to bolt them back as soon as everyone was seated.

There were representatives of Federated Farmers, officials of farm-machinery firms, lamb buyers, members of Young Farmers' and Country Girls' Clubs, the local M.P., the Minister of Agriculture, a few wives, someone in a dog-collar. That would be the Presbyterian minister from Balloch, no doubt.

Morgan opened the doors, returned to the table, held out two bowls of soup on a tray to Janet. "These are for the Prime Minister and Uncle . . . your privilege."

Janet went through, tiny and immaculate in her white uniform, came up through the other two tables to the centre ones, seeing no one at all, placed the soup carefully, and looked up.

Thomas MacNee said easily, "This is Miss Janet MacGregor . . . my niece-to-be and the saver of this situation."

So they *had* told him!

Janet received an urbane twinkle from the Prime Minister. "I know all about it," he said, and his smile reached his voice. "We met a little earlier, didn't we, Miss MacGregor? In an informal way . . . no, let me use the right expression ... a *casual* way!"

Janet shot a swift look at Therese, sitting demurely at her grandfather's left hand. She had to laugh back.

"I'm afraid I was unaware of the honour done me, sir," she said, and escaped towards the kitchen.

It wasn't till she was serving the second course that she noticed the Raymines. Dallas was wearing a mink shoulder cape and a hat that was more suitable for Ascot! Mink ... at a tractor display! Janet decided she felt more suitably dressed in her starched linen.

Something of the tension left Janet. Practically everyone she served had something friendly to say to her. She managed not to appear bustled. The appreciative gleam in Thomas MacNee's eye repaid her for the work she had put into it. Her guardian angel must have been working overtime. There were no awkward moments, no spilt soup or sudden anxieties. It had been the best idea to make it a cold luncheon.

She felt quite maternal towards the triplets' grandfather. This was the biggest day of his life, entertaining his Prime Minister at Windrush Hill. She was glad she had made it possible, though she could not have done without Morgan's assistance. She was conscious of a glow within her that wasn't solely due to the knowledge of a hard job well done. She and Morgan loaded the trays with the coffee-pots. It was nearly over.

She and Morgan had their coffee in the kitchen, sitting on stools. The door opened and in came Therese, eyes sparkling.

"Janet, Granddad wants you and Morgan to come in to the dining-room."

Janet felt diffident. She looked at Morgan, who responded immediately. He took her arm. They went in, then paused.

The Prime Minister rose. "This isn't an occasion for speeches," he said, "but one, at least, must be made. We would like to express our appreciation of the excellent service given us today, in an emergency, by a very new Kiwi. Everything has been perfection, but it takes very little imagination to know that behind this meal

that has been a feast for the eyes as well as for the palate lies many hours of preparation and possibly short rations of sleep. On behalf of all present here, we thank you most sincerely, Miss Janet MacGregor."

Everyone clapped, then looked to Janet. She looked appealingly at Morgan. He took her hand, but shook his head. "Having risen to one occasion, Janet, I'm sure you're capable of rising to another and voicing your own thanks. They wouldn't enjoy it as much if I did it for you."

The things one did because there was no escape! In a voice that didn't seem to belong to her because it was clear and unfaltering and she felt like a jellyfish, Janet uttered her thanks and actually heard herself saying she'd been glad to do it.

A local man got up and said this was as good a time as any for the Balloch district to offer felicitations to both Janet and Morgan. That Morgan really had accomplished something by bringing back a bride-to-be who had beauty *and* ability and who had won all hearts by her performance today, and one and all thought she would make a wonderful mistress for Skyreach.

That was the moment when Janet met Dallas Raymine's eyes, and never had she seen such naked malice and hate. Janet involuntarily shivered. She'd done this for Thomas's sake, knew that this was not a standard she could maintain, it had been sheer desperation that had carried her through; knew that very often probably, these people would find her far from a perfect housekeeper, but in making a success of it she had made an enemy. Plus the fact that this man had just stressed that she was Morgan's fiancée. How ridiculous for Dallas to be upset over it when she was the one who knew it was all pretence. She must really love Morgan if she could

not bear another girl linked with him in this mockery of a betrothal.

Janet felt slightly sick.

She and Morgan regained the sanctuary of the kitchen. He looked at her sharply. "Janet, you aren't going to flake out on me, are you? Has it been too much for you?" He caught her hands.

She straightened up. "No, of course not, just a little bit of reaction. I'm not used to being in the public eye."

Morgan said, "Here, have this." He filled her a glass of orange juice. She drank it gratefully.

He leaned forward, pushed her smock open to reveal a green sweater over a MacGregor tartan skirt. "Good . . . you're all ready for the hill. Put your brogues on and a windcheater, Janet, and come with me to watch. Mrs. McNeur and Phyllis and a couple of friends have volunteered to take full responsibility for the dishes.

"The P.M.'s just staying another three-quarters of an hour, then he's off for Invercargill and back to Wellington tomorrow. What a life politicians lead! Wonderful how they stand up to it. Come along."

Janet went with a dull ache in her heart. If only it hadn't been pretence!

The rest of the afternoon was just a jumble of impressions . . . the farewell to the official party, meeting scores of people, introduced by either Morgan or Thomas, the roaring of the tractors, the blare of the megaphones as techniques were explained, the

embarrassment of not knowing quite what to say as one person after another congratulated her on having provided such a meal at short notice.

Janet's head was spinning—a natural result of too much happening in too short a time, she supposed. She looked at the quiet hills below and beyond Windrush Hill, at the far glimpse of the sea, and longed for solitude.

Noise seemed beating at her ears, pulses were throbbing at all the pressure points.

She found herself by Mrs. McNeur, and said, "It's good to find a face I can recognise. I'm going to have an awkward time in the next few weeks, trying to fit names to faces."

Sadie McNeur laughed. "A nightmare, isn't it? I was President of the Women's Institute for some years and my first Conference was like that. But as soon as you meet them individually you'll be right. And, of course, as far as approach is concerned you're off to a flying start. Not only are we glad to think Morgan is settling down with someone like you but the way you tackled the situation today has done something. The fact is that none of us would have liked to have thought that when the Prime Minister visited us, things weren't up to standard."

"That's very kind of you. I'm glad I was able to help. There wasn't time for anything fussy or elaborate of course, but at least it saved Mr. MacNee's face. I'm enchanted with this view. It's so different from every point. Those mountains really are blue, aren't they? The forested ones."

"Does it remind you a little of Scotland? Many folk think so."

"Yes, I felt at home immediately. Except that everything's on a larger scale—except the population. Other things remind me too. I was most amazed to find Thomas MacNee had retained so much of a Scots burr. He uses Scots expressions too. Because he's a third or fourth generation Kiwi, isn't he?"

"Yes, but you get that quite a lot here. It's disappearing a little now. Old Mrs. MacIntyre, who was a Macdonald before marriage, came from Portobello ... I mean the one on Otago Peninsula, not the Scottish one . . . and had been born there eighty-five years ago. In those days, of course, there were only Scots folk and Maori folk there, so the children retained the tongue. Come to think of it, I heard once the Maoris spoke with a faint Scots burr when they picked up English. Well, Mrs. MacIntyre still sounds as if she were newly out from Skye. But now that New Zealand is thickly populated -" She caught Janet's look and amended it to:

"Well, *more* thickly populated, and the English have infiltrated Otago and Southland, there are no isolated pockets left purely Scots."

She laughed again. "I'm a Sassenach myself, you'll notice. In any case, everyone moves round more these days. In the early years the roads were clay tracks, many of the rivers unbridged, so people stayed put."

Janet nodded. "There's been a change in Britain too. Two wars have had the people on the move. And they're now more travel-minded. There's something I didn't expect to see . . . all this greenness. Hettie Sinclair, a friend of ours in Lochiemuir, has a sister in Oamaru and she often received coloured slides. The country was quite yellow—and I noticed it there coming down, too."

"Well, in North Otago—that's where Oamaru is— they don't have the rainfall we do. Glorious climate if your living's not dependent upon grazing. You get that yellow colour a lot in Canterbury and Marlborough in dry seasons. Down here—especially in Southland—we have bigger rainfalls and lush growth. We get a bit maligned by holiday-makers, of course, but our production makes them envious. We're much greener here than Central Otago. It really bakes there. But we've had a wet autumn down here."

"And that will mean -" Janet stopped, coloured, said: "I'd better be careful or I'll make a fool *of* myself by making rash statements. I'll start again and put it in question form: Will that mean the growth will be so soft that severe frosts will cut it down the more?"

Morgan's voice said in her ear: "Where did you pick up this farming lore? That's an extremely sensible remark, my Janet."

"In Lochiemuir, of course. I may have been a district nurse, but I absorbed a lot as I went my rounds. Even if I was city born and bred I've always loved the country best." She grinned. "The only way I could gain the confidence of the menfolk was to listen to their doings. I had a lot of prejudice to break down. Not only was I fresh from the city but they regarded me as a child. They soon found out their mistake."

Morgan's laugh was pure merriment. "I bet they did! My redoubtable Janet!" He turned to Mrs. McNeur. "You'd never believe it, Sadie, but she's a holy terror. No malingerers would ever get past her."

Sadie MacNeur said, with a severe look at him, "I hope you realise what a treasure you've got. Your lines have fallen in very pleasant places, my lad. Thank heaven you had more sense than poor

Arnold. I'd say he's parted with his peace of mind for the rest of his life."

No doubt Sadie McNeur meant well, but Janet thought it would have been better left unsaid. They all three looked across to where Dallas was standing, her face tilted back, talking animatedly to a very handsome lamb buyer. Arnold was watching her, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on her face, a little smile on his lips, a proud smile.

Morgan said easily, "Oh, I don't know. No doubt he finds compensations in being married to her. And after all, Arnold can afford a decorative wife."

"You mean one who toils not, nor spins!" said Sadie McNeur, tartly. Then she laughed. "Men don't like women being catty about other women, so I'd better be careful. But Dallas Raymine brings out the worst in me. Though I'm glad she's well and truly married now. My nephew spent a few months here and fell for her in a big way. It had me really worried. What my sister would have said I don't know. Though she'd never have considered him seriously. Not enough money. But he was just one more scalp to hang at her belt. And never a thought in her mind as to what she might do to a sensitive lad."

Janet decided she must get Mrs. McNeur off the subject. What it would be doing to Morgan she didn't know. Especially when he knew Janet was aware that he loved her. She tried to tell herself it served him right, but it was no good, she felt wretchedly sorry for him. She seized on the only safe topic, weather.

"What I find so fascinating is how hot it is for the time of year. May would correspond with October or November in Scotland,

wouldn't it? But it's terrifically hot today. I thought I would have cooled down once I was out of the kitchen."

They both stared at her.

"But it isn't really hot, Janet," said Morgan, "in fact, it's rather chilly. It's not all that much colder in Scotland."

Mrs. McNeur said anxiously, "You must have got overheated in the kitchen. Perhaps the excitement and strain too. Whatever happens, don't get a chill."

Well, at least it got them off the painful subject of Dallas.

Thomas called Morgan over, and Dallas came up to them. Mrs. McNeur disappeared promptly, murmuring something about seeing if the women in the shed were nearly ready with the tea, she was dying for a drink.

Dallas said smoothly, "I really must congratulate you on that luncheon. It was very cleverly done."

Cleverly? What a word to choose!

Janet said lightly, "Well, it was a family effort. Fortunately there were no hitches, though I wasn't at ease till the whole thing was over. I quite like cooking—in nursing you do a certain amount of it—but I've never attempted anything on so large a scale before. I was terrified we wouldn't have enough, but we've ended up with the traditional twelve baskets over. But I hope never to go through such an ordeal again."

Dallas's voice was a drawl. "Oh, don't bother to dissemble before *me*, dear girl. You enjoyed every moment of it. It showed you up in such a good light with Morgan. I can see you're going to seize

every opportunity you can to impress him and the whole community. That approach is as old as time . . . The way to a man's heart through his stomach."

Janet was furious with herself because her knees were like plastic and her palms moist. She didn't think she'd ever met up with direct enmity before. Oh, she'd experienced the minor spites and jealousies over promotions and preferments in her training days, but nothing like this. She took a firm hold on her temper.

She said evenly, "It was more to help Mr. MacNee out. He was cruelly disappointed. Any man would be, when expecting his Prime Minister. It was up to me."

"Of course it was, seeing it was your arrival, with those three limbs of Satan, that caused Elvira to walk off the place."

Janet swallowed. "I suppose it *would* be upsetting to any housekeeper to be faced suddenly with the addition of three children to a household, but they *are* Mr. MacNee's grandchildren—this is their rightful home, and after all, I was with them, a trained nurse, to look after them."

Dallas laughed. "Elvira didn't think of you as the children's nurse, I'll be bound . . . she'd think of you as Morgan's fiancée. That's why she walked out."

Janet said wearily, "Well, it doesn't matter now. I'm probably not the housekeeper Elvira was, but Mr. MacNee seems to think we'll manage."

Dallas's amusement was malicious, not mirthful. "Nobody *could* be as good a housekeeper as Elvira. It's all right at the moment, when Thomas is full of indignation at the way Elvira walked out on him—but men are creatures of habit. He'll soon miss, Elvira's

ways. He may be on the crest of the wave just now because he's got someone of his very own to hand the estate down to, but the kids will soon get on his nerves, kids always do. It's not going to be all honey. And as for Morgan -"

She paused.

Janet was suddenly aware that perspiration was trickling off her forehead through her eyebrows. She put up a shaking hand to brush it away. Whatever was the matter with her?

She rallied. "And as for Morgan . . . what were you going to say, Mrs. Raymine?"

"As for Morgan he won't think it all honey for long, either. Believe me, no man in his position would.

There's always an undercurrent of jealousy on big estates."

Janet's mind had received too many impressions the last few days. She tried to grapple with that and answer it, but she couldn't seem to find words. Especially as she'd had stray thoughts like that herself—did Dallas mean Morgan was only trying to appear as if he welcomed the triplets to Windrush Hill? Was even his saying their place was at their grandfather's table an attempt to make her think he did not mind them being the heirs? Or was it only one heir? Because Tommy was the oldest by twenty minutes. And would that situation, in years to come, complicate the comradeship of the brothers? Would Connal ever feel bitter about that twenty minutes? They both loved farm life. And why was Dallas so furious about this bogus engagement? Did she fear that Morgan might, after all, fall genuinely in love with Janet? Or was it just that she liked, as Mrs. McNeur had said, to display scalps? That she wanted the limelight, something Janet had stolen from her today? There were women like that, who, even after they were

married, still wanted to appear sought after, liked other men dancing attendance upon them.

All of a sudden, Janet, to her horror, wanted to laugh. She felt extremely light-headed. Those hills . . . how odd, they were wavering. The skyline was positively moving up and down . . . but Morgan had said, hadn't he, that they got few earthquakes. Well, it looked as if this were one of the few. Morgan . . . Dallas had been saying something about Morgan . . . she must answer her . . . she heard, as far off, her voice, shaking with laughter, say: "Really, Morgan's been quite a lad in his day, hasn't he? Attracting two such opposite types . . . the *femme fatale* and the *femme formidable* . . . you and Elvira!" And at that moment the ground came up and hit her.

CHAPTER NINE

SHE didn't know how long she was out to it, but she came to, though only partly, to hear Morgan swearing, and for some stupid reason it sounded comforting. He seemed to be swearing about Elvira and trying to gather her up.

He finished up by saying: "I ought to have realised . . . she said she was hot, didn't she, Sadie? She's in a high fever. We'll get her to the house. Phyl, ring the doctor immediately."

Janet's mind clouded over, but something was bothering her; and if only she could remember what it was, Morgan would tell her. Her mind groped after it.

Suddenly they heard her say in a high, clear voice, "I'll never make a Kiwi ... I can't pronounce those names. And I've got to know how to before I meet the Prime Minister. Morgan, help me. What was the name?"

"What name, Janet?" His face was close to her, but it was all misty.

"That place where the Maoris gathered . . . you told me in the kitchen . . . and they said that nice thing about the Prime Minister. What was it?" Her voice was fretful.

"They said it when they gathered for the twenty-fourth anniversary celebrations of the accession of King Koroki ... is that when you mean?"

"But where?"

"Oh, on the Turangawaewae marae, Ngaruawahia."

"And what did they say about him?"

"They said: 'He will steer the canoe of State with skill so that the spray of the ocean will not mar the sheen of the plume.' "

Janet's head fell against his shoulder. "I like that," she murmured contentedly, "and he was kind to Therese. So are you, Morgan. But you think Jeanne-Marie's a French baggage, don't you? But she isn't."

She heard someone, Morgan she thought, say hastily, "She's delirious, of course," and heard herself say quite crossly, "I am not. Nurses are never delirious," and then she knew nothing more.

The next few days she spent mostly sleeping, some hours in high delirium, being dosed and sponged and fed very light food. At times, for a few moments, it would clear, and Janet would realise with horror that she had been quite ill ... in a household where there was no other woman to look after her, or to care for the men and children. But it seemed as if Sadie McNeur and her Phyllis were always there. And somebody else called Rosemary, whoever she was.

Then came the day when Janet came to herself and stayed that way.

"It was glandular fever, dear, the worst case the doctor has ever seen. He said you'd probably have got off with a lighter attack had you not had such a terrific two days here on top of all that travelling. He said you must have been very run down, that even for someone of slight build you're painfully thin, and we're to build you up.

"The whole district has been concerned. Phyllis and Rosemary haven't needed to do a tap of baking. Cakes and biscuits have come

in from all quarters, to say nothing of pots of soup, beef-tea, cooked chickens . . . enough to fatten up half a dozen of you."

Janet found that weak tears were slipping out of the corners of her eyes. "What a nuisance I've made of myself after such a good start! And this top floor was filthy, to say nothing of the unpacking and sorting. Oh dear!"

Mrs. McNeur sat down and took her hand. "Now, my dear, it's all been done for you. It's like that in the country. You'll have seen it many a time in district nursing. Everyone pitches in. Mrs. Henderson—Rosemary's mother—came over every day at first till she and Rose got it all cleaned up. You should just see the spit and polish they've put on. It will be a good start for you.

"This house is charming, of course, but far too large for one woman to manage. Elvira did it, of course, but then she was a machine, not a woman—and about as warm-hearted! Rosemary is going to come over for a few weeks. We aren't going to let you overdo. She stays home, like my Phyllis, it's not a very busy time just now—not as if it were lambing or harvesting."

Janet, coming back slowly to a world of reality, asked: "How are the children? Have they behaved themselves? They—they must have had to start school. Did they settle all right?"

"No, the school holidays are on. They start next Monday. But Mr. MacNee has seen to it that they've met ever so many' of the children, so they won't be too strange. Poor bairns, they were so upset about you."

Janet's hand came to her mouth. "They've never seen me ill before. Did they think I was going to die? Did they?"

"Only for a little while, Janet. As soon as the doctor found the lumps all over you and diagnosed glandular fever, he and Thomas explained to the children that it was because it carried a high fever that you seemed so ill. Oh, but they've been so painfully good. It will be a real relief to them to know you're all right again. Their grandfather has taken them to Tapanui today to take their minds off it. But I'll get -"

Janet was never to know what Mrs. McNeur was going to get, for at that moment Morgan appeared in the doorway.

"Janet! I thought I heard voices . . . and not the high, wandery one we've heard from you lately ..." His eyes met hers with a strange expression. She got the message ... he just had to behave as any man would when his loved one had been very ill and was now on the road to recovery. He came quickly across, bent his head and kissed her. When he lifted his head, Sadie McNeur was away out of the room!

The cornflower blue eyes under the golden brows met the hazel-green ones, deep-set and baffling, in a gaze that was appraising on both sides. Then simultaneously they looked away.

Janet said breathlessly: "This is a most awkward situation. I wish we could end it quickly. I suppose we can't.

But -" She swallowed, started again. "But, Morgan, what about you? Isn't it going to be hard on you, keeping up a pretence so long?"

He suddenly looked whimsical. "Oh, as far as I'm concerned it has its compensations. Oh, here's Sadie with the afternoon tea."

It was most appetising. Rosemary had spread tiny circular scones with apple jelly. The china was exquisite, the tea had a faint

flavour of China buds. And first, for Janet, was a bowl of beef-tea, with half a dozen sippets floating on top. Never had anything tasted so good.

"From now on," said Sadie McNeur, pouring tea in a plain cup for Morgan, "we'll concentrate on getting some flesh on your bones, won't we, Morgan?"

His eyes crinkled into narrow slits of laughter. "We certainly will! She's all bones and angles. I like more curves myself."

Flushed, Janet glared at him. He was outrageous!

After he had gone, Mrs. McNeur settled her comfortably, closed the white Venetian blinds and said she must now have a natural sleep, so that she was strong enough to have the triplets and Thomas visit her as soon as they got home.

Janet dutifully closed her eyes, but her thoughts were busy. As far as Morgan was concerned it had compensations ! He meant it would keep Arnold unsuspecting. Her thoughts went back to the day of the tractor display and Morgan saying a man married to Dallas would find compensations. That was true . . . women might not like her, might see through her, fear and despise her, but men would find her irresistible. There was something about her . . . something compelling and magical. A man's woman. Actually that remark of Morgan's had shown restraint. That would be because Mrs. McNeur would not suspect he still dangled after her.

Janet wished she knew the whole story. If she had been genuinely engaged she'd have had the right. As it was she had no right whatever, and because she didn't wish to precipitate anything that might lead to her having to leave the children and Windrush Hill, she dared not risk it.

She didn't want to leave Windrush Hill . . . and not only for the children's sake. She drifted off into a deep sleep and woke hours later to find it twilight and footsteps coming up the stairs. The next moment the triplets and Thomas were in the room, delighted to see her back to almost normal, but very restrained in their joy.

In a fortnight's time Janet was herself again. Rosemary Henderson still came every day, driving over from her people's home in a little Mini of her own. Thomas was paying her an excellent wage.

Windrush Hill was looking lovely once more, all the rooms restored. The linen cupboards were full of beautifully ironed sheets and tablecloths, and Janet was surprised to go into the storeroom and find the shelves well stocked with jams and bottled fruits.

Morgan heard her cry of surprise and followed her in. "The whole district responded. Waste is always anathema to country folk, especially where they're of Scots descent. They didn't organise a drive to do the replenishing, they simply arrived. We even had sides of bacon and hams brought in, and several chooks and cuts of venison were brought from other folks' deep freezes to ours.

"And when Alun Richardson heard what Elvira had done—he was at the tractor display—he went straight home and ordered her to leave his house. She's gone back to her own home, away up Marlborough. She's always had a car of her own, so he didn't have to drive her to get a bus. He fired her things in and said go! So now our dear Elvira is back up north. She's never got on well with her own mother—my guess is she's bitterly ruing the day she left here. Especially as Thomas had always given her a good bonus at Christmas time and harvest. Alun said she was livid when she heard what a good spread you'd managed."

Soon they were in to winter with a vengeance. The chrysanthemums blackened overnight, it was dark by five-thirty now and not light till eight in the morning. The frosty days were glorious at midday, with golden sunlight, but stingingly cold in the mornings. They had a twenty-seven degree frost one morning and there were reports of a hoar-frost in Central Otago after a day of mist.

The men brought strange fruits home from the railhead, cases of tree tomatoes and Chinese gooseberries— both fruits, Janet found to her surprise, from the citrus orchards north of Auckland. She loved the rich purple-red pulp of the tree tomatoes and learned to make trifles with them. The pale green Chinese gooseberries, as large as pullets' eggs, and shaped like cylinders, were coated with brown furry stuff and were most decorative sliced on top of cream sponges, their black seeds making a charming contrast. She liked them eaten with sugar and cream, but the children learned to eat them by rubbing the furry coat off between their fingers, cutting them in half and squeezing up the pulp.

Janet learned to add passion-fruit to icing for the tops of madeira cakes and became devoted to diced grapefruit in their skins for breakfast, something Therese and her grandfather looked upon with scorn.

She loved kumeras, the native sweet potato, that had a faint parsnip flavour and were delicious with roasts, and she tried and liked puwha, the native thistle, cooked like spinach.

"What about whitebait and toheroas?" she asked.

"The whitebait season isn't till October when it begins running in the rivers. You can see our nets down in the green shed. Great muslin frameworks. They're tiny transparent fish, an inch to two

inches long, and run in shoals. You cook them in batter, or even just beaten egg, and they turn white and are a real delicacy—though give me oysters, myself. You can't get your own toheroas down here. Only up north—and there's a limit to how many you can dig out of the toheroa beds on the beaches. I'll get you some tinned. The soup is good, most attractive, pale green, with almost an oyster flavour."

He brought her home a couple of tins one day. It was all so domestic and uneventful that Janet felt she'd lived this sort of life for ever. She was glad that Larch Hill, the Raymines' estate, was so far away by road. Yet, withal, she had a feeling that this convalescent period marked just a halt in problems that would beset them later.

Suddenly Windrush Hill lived up to its name. Fierce storms beat up from the South Pole, gales came in across the Tasman, battered Fiordland, and swept their way up, wreaking havoc with the power poles and forest trees, uprooting them like matchsticks.

Morgan drove the children down to the corner now and waited till the school bus came for them. The garden lay ravaged under the icy fingers of the wind; the dahlia stalks rotted to a slimy brown, but against the beaten wet earth, the cotoneasters blazed redly.

The rowans lost their berries early on to the birds. Thomas MacNee kept the three bird tables well filled with bread, fixed lumps of suet to the trees for others and hung jars of honey and water or syrup and water on the trees in the shrubbery for the honey-eaters, the bell-birds, the tuis, the wax-eyes.

They even had native wood-pigeons coming to the berry-bearing trees. Janet loved to watch them . . . what a size they were, with plump white breasts, grey wings and iridescent heads. They were

so tame that if not taken notice of, they would drop twigs on one's head while walking below.

The rainstorms were interspersed with rainbows of a brilliance Janet had never before seen. "The rainbow god is walking over the hills," said Morgan. This delighted Therese. "I like people who believe in things like that," she said. "Do you know," she added indignantly, "there are people in Scotland who actually don't believe in the Loch Ness monster!"

"They have no soul," said Morgan solemnly. "Do you know I paid a visit there specially to see for myself? It just wasn't his appearance day, that's all. Wait till spring when I can take you over the hills and far away, Therese, and the boys too, of course. We'll visit some very lonely and lovely spots. The haunt of the taniwha, for instance."

"What's a taniwha?"

"A fabulous monster. Same as the Australian bunyip."

"Oh, I've heard of bunyips."

"Well, don't let our taniwha hear or his feelings will be hurt. Ours is usually in the form of a giant lizard or fish. When Tane mated with Hinemaunga, the mountain girl, their offspring was Putoto whose descendants were taniwha, reptiles and insects. Actually this pool is a horrible place, dark and treacherous and mostly evil-smelling mud. But every now and then a spring bubbles through and troubles the slime and makes it heave and gurgle ... so it's said that the taniwha is turning over."

Therese heaved a sigh. "I just love stories like that. I like to think about them at nights when I'm safely tucked up in bed and it makes

me go all lovely goose-flesh. Do you know any more, Cousin Morgan?"

"Yes, plenty, but your—but Janet is making faces at me, so I suppose I'm to stop."

"Well, we once went through a frightful time with Therese with nightmares, and it was only that she was reading things like that."

Morgan laughed. "Anyway, you can only see that place if I take you—it's miles away, deep in the back country. We go there pig-hunting sometimes. But there's a much nicer place nearer at hand. We bathe there in summer. It's quite shallow, so it gets really warm and it's called Pua-o-te-rangi. Have you kids any idea what that means? It's time you did, the way I've gone over Maori words with you, night after night."

"Rangi is sky." That was Connal.

Tommy said laboriously, brows knitted, "Is pua that thistle we ate boiled? Could it be thistle-of-the-sky? Is it Caledonian thistle? Is the water sort of purple?"

"No, but that's not a bad shot. That's puwha. Pua means flower, so _"

"So it's flower-of-the-sky," finished Therese. "What a lovely name! Has it got a legend?"

"Yes, one day the spirit of the ngaio tree was very angry with Aotearoa because everywhere was discord, all the tribes were fighting and she said they did not deserve beauty any more, so, one morning, all the warring tribes woke to discover that not a single ngaio bush bore a single flower. And they forsook their fighting and began to hold a tangi for the death of the ngaio trees, for if

there were no flowers there would be no seed and in time ngaio would vanish from the face of the earth.

"So they gathered on this hilltop and the tears of their weeping ran into a little hollow on the top of the hill itself. Then all of a sudden there dropped into it from Rangī the sky one single ngaio blossom, the ripples widened and widened till they reached the verge and the spirit of the ngaio spoke from the sky and said: 'War always destroys beauty, and unless you cease from fighting there will never more be the shining pale purity of the ngaio blossom to be seen in this land.' And the people lifted up their voices and promised they would fight no more. The spirit of the ngaio tree said that when spring came again, the ngaio trees would bear blossom—and so they have till this day. Ever since, on the hill above Skyreach, the mountain tarn that lies there has been called Pua-o-te-rangi, the flower-of-the-sky."

He looked across at Janet, sitting motionless, her elbows on the table and her small pointed chin in her cupped hands. "Janet, you're as starry-eyed as the youngsters." Janet felt her heart turn over. Why did a man have to be so kindred . . . and so false?

The next day was glorious. The light frost had merely silvered the cobwebs in the dense green macrocarpa hedges till they were miracles of diamonded light and the sky stretched a cloudless blue from horizon to horizon. The wind wasn't blowing from Whitecombs today with the razor-edge of its snows in it. The wind had curled up into a ball and gone to sleep like a hedgehog in the valley, Morgan had said, Therese informed Janet. But now the children were at school.

The sun even wakened a sleeping rosebud in the garden, and Janet discovered hard green buds deep in the thick spikes of the grape hyacinths; that the cinerarias under the pines were patching the

shadows with cerise and purple, pink and blue; that the spears of the daffodils were pushing through the hard ground, the gorse on the hillside showing more yellow. Janet felt something she thought had died during the June storms begin to revive within her.

Was Morgan finding a scar had healed?

He came back from fencing up in one of the gullies and said, "Greg and Jack can finish that now. You and I are going to take the Land-Rover and go over to Skyreach, Janet, to see your future home. You're quite strong enough now."

Janet turned from peeling potatoes. She began to say something scathing when she saw Thomas behind him and stopped.

Thomas, all unknowing, said, "That's what I told him yesterday. We're all going over. I ought to let the two of you see it alone, but there's something I want to ask you when you see it."

Janet slipped her apron off, gave a few instructions to Rosemary, who said: "You'll love it, Janet. There's something about that house that's completely fascinating."

Was there? thought Janet. But *she* wouldn't find it so. Not a house Dallas had planned ... or a house that had been designed by a man for Dallas. Oh, no.

Rosemary was in love and thought Janet was too.

Windrush Hill was a much larger station than she'd dreamed. It was a very rough track, winding over hill and dale, rutted and in places with very little shingle.

"That's why I waited till today—till the frost had firmed the ground."

"But surely there's an easier way to get to it, Morgan?"

"Yes, there is. You can come in from the other side of Larch Hill—the Raymines' place. It's only half a mile from the Larch Hill Road."

"You mean the Raymines will be your nearest neighbours?"

"*Our* nearest neighbours, darling," corrected Morgan for his uncle's sake.

"Our nearest neighbours," acquiesced Janet meekly.

"But we'll be getting contractors to improve this track —they'll make quite a road of it. We must have better communication between the two houses. It hasn't mattered till now. It suited the builders to come in from Larch Hill Road."

Thomas said: "You'd better get on to the builders double-quick now, Morgan. You'll want to be married by Christmas, won't you?"

Janet said hurriedly, "I think we were counting on a longer engagement than that. I want to get the triplets well settled before making any drastic change. At present I'm needed at Windrush Hill."

Thomas said mysteriously, "I've got an idea about that. But never mind now. Anyway, with Morgan being away overseas, this house has been at a standstill long enough. I'd like to see it finished now."

Janet expected to see a stark new bungalow on a bare hillside, with all its future ahead of it and with nothing of the charm of Windrush Hill. Instead, as they rounded the shoulder of Skyreach and turned

upwards, they saw a cluster of native trees, totara and rimu, red and black native beech, with here and there an English oak or mountain ash, bare and graceful. There was something very established-looking about it.

She glimpsed one or two outbuildings that were obviously not new, weathered to a yellowish-grey. Before she could ask they swept round a clump of blue-gums, on to a circular drive, well shingled, and came to rest in front of a long, low, curved house nestled against the background of dark pines to the south-west.

"See . . ." said Morgan, for once perfectly natural, "we built it round the little stone cottage in the middle for sheer sentiment's sake. This was the second house on Windrush Hill in the old days. In fact, my grandmother was born in it. Just four rooms. So we added a wing each side to tone with it, and I think the effect is good, don't you?"

Janet got out, stood in silence, her eyes running over it. The house nestled for shelter into this fold of the hills. They had painted the wings, which were wooden, a piney, dark brown, with pure white facings. The small paned windows were picked out in white. It had a Canadian air, she thought. The centre, older part was in the beige-coloured stone of the hillside, in rough blocks. It had been quarried in pioneer days and seemed part of the very landscape. The front step looked as if it would carry you into the cottage sitting-room. Either side, the new parts had patios behind thick glass that would trap every bit of sun and faced north. French windows led from the new rooms on to them. Janet could imagine them with tubs of hydrangeas and cypresses, with low stone troughs of petunias and daffodils, a corner screened by pot plants and palms, wrought-iron tables, for cool drinks in hot weather. . . .

Thomas, watching her upturned face, the bright, false winter sunshine turning the wheat-coloured hair to purest gold, said, turning on his heel, "I'll leave you to get her to name the day. She's fallen in love with it already. I'll take the Land-Rover over to look at those Galloways in Last Ditch Gully."

Morgan was chuckling as he led her in. "For goodness' sake, Janet, play up."

She recovered herself, said, "Morgan, isn't it locked? Aren't you afraid of vandals?"

"Too far off the beaten track. Everybody knows everybody round here. Besides, there's nothing to steal. I'd not got as far as furnishing it. Just some built-in stuff."

This was, as she had suspected, the cottage sitting-room.

It was quite small. The mantelpiece was dark and old-fashioned, a sort of black marble with green veinings. It would look charming with small white alabaster figurines on it, she thought, and there were shallow china cabinets, arched, built each side into the recesses of the walls. She could imagine frilly Dresden figures, tiny Limoges vases ... it would make a charming parlour, a place a woman could call her own. She could visualise a tapestry frame, loose covers of pastel-tinted chintz on old chairs with carved walnut arms and spreading laps, dim taffeta curtains with silvery fringe. She said so, unthinkingly.

Morgan said, "Could you keep that up in front of Uncle? Appear to plan our future. He'll approve. He was over here one day when Dallas said: 'Of course you'll tear out that monstrosity of a fireplace!' He was furious. But your ideas will go down big with him."

Couldn't he see the very mention of Dallas froze her? Automatically she accompanied him through the rest of the house. It was just as harmoniously fused into one home inside as outside. The kitchen and back bedroom of the cottage had been made into one big kitchen, beautifully equipped, and the other rooms were charming too, especially the main bedroom that had two sets of windows, one that looked right out to the Blue Mountains, one that led, via a ground floor balcony, roofed and glassed-in, to what would be a side-garden. As Janet stepped out on to the balcony, she knew a sharp yearning to fashion that garden.

It should be a herb-garden with lavender borders and flagstones with alyssum and mignonette in the crevices. There should be a stone wall at the far end where the clay bank needed keeping back, and weeping rosemary trailing down it. There should be mint and sage and thyme, bruising as you walked by and sending up their fragrances . . . there should be basil and marjoram and sweet cicely . . . and balsam with its red blossoms. You would stop there and pick a sprig to crush in your fingers, walking there in twilights or early mornings with your husband. And there ought to be a stone figure in the centre of the crazy paving, the figure of a piper, piping down the hill. It was so sweetly sheltered in this district of fierce gales ... a little secret place, a sort of Avilion of which Tennyson had said:

*... the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.*

Perhaps, like King Arthur, Janet had a deep wound. But this was not the place where she would ever be permitted to find healing, she thought.

Thomas MacNee caught up with them there, coming round the corner and seeing Janet rapt. She turned, remembered her promise to Morgan to pretend, and began to tell him what a lovely herb garden it would make.

Suddenly it came quite easily. "A sheltering wall here, Uncle Thomas ... of rocks from the hillside embedded in the clay. Some lichen-covered. It would make the wall look more natural than a raw concrete one."

He caught on. Said: "Would you like a little fountain to play in the middle? It would sound very nice on hot days."

Morgan, a shake of laughter in his voice, quickly controlled, said, "No, not a fountain, Uncle Thomas. That means a pool, and it would be too dangerous for our children at the toddler stage."

Janet turned quickly away. She would not meet his eyes.

"Aye, that's so . . . unless of course, if Janet really fancied it, we could have it draining away."

Janet managed, "I—I didn't really think about such a thing. But I did imagine a little stone statue if we could get one that was suitable. I saw one once, long ago, a piper. It always intrigued me. I liked it much better than some of those fountains with a boy or an animal with water spraying up out of their mouths. So unnatural."

She was talking quickly to get the conversation away from the too personal. Morgan began to laugh. "I know exactly what you mean.

If you watch them for long enough you find yourself swallowing madly because you know the statue can't."

"Have you picked your colour schemes yet?" asked Thomas MacNee, sweeping them back inside and producing a notebook and stump of pencil.

Janet found herself responding to his eagerness in a most natural manner, just every now and then a sense of unreality sweeping over her.

"Blue for our bedroom," said Morgan outrageously, "to match my Janet's eyes."

His Janet gave him a fierce glance when Thomas's attention was distracted momentarily by what he thought was a faulty lock on a wardrobe.

It made her feel contradictory. "I think blue might be rather cold for a room with this aspect. It looks right into the little sheltered garden and the pines shadow it."

"Only on that side. And after all, it's not always winter. We can get some surprisingly hot summers. And this window here gets the sun all day—the north one. I'd have thought you'd have loved blue, Janet."

"Why?"

"I remember once reading that a woman who liked blue colours about her—in furnishings—was always a very womanly woman."

She did not deign to answer. Morgan enjoyed acting. It appealed to a boyish love of mischief and mystery in him.

Thomas watched them indulgently, and laughed. "Don't you two love to spar! Now just be careful. Hanging pictures is supposed to be the test of compatibility. If it survives that, it will survive anything. But you two are already quarrelling about wallpapers!"

Janet said: "We'll certainly never agree over the pictures. Morgan is very apprehensive over Louis's. And needn't be."

This time it was Morgan who gave her a warning glance.

Oh, well, Thomas would probably think Louis had given them to her for minding the children when they were abroad.

Thomas said, "He certainly is off beam there. Cecile sent me one—not long before the accident. I was very pleased with it. It's still in Dunedin being framed. I must pick it up. I liked it so much, I had ideas about asking them to come out here. I thought he'd like Central Otago. But there wasn't time."

Morgan said: "Well, come on out to the kitchen and I'll light that Primus and make you a cup of tea."

Janet, surprised, said: "Have you got provisions here?"

"Just a tin of mixed biscuits, some tea and dried milk. I've been working up here quite a few days since coming home, mainly clearing out the old sheds. Can't bear clutter. Haven't you seen the smoke of my bonfires from your bedroom window? It's a good time of year for it."

"I did notice smoke once or twice, but I thought it was on some other property."

She came across to the cupboard, said: "I'll put the cups out."

Morgan laughed and got there before her. "I'll get them." He gently pushed her back. "I left some dirty cups there the other day. You approved of my domesticity once—can't have you changing your mind. I work on the principle of not washing up till you have to."

He brought out three cups, but Janet had seen all she needed to see . . . lipstick on one of the cups!

She closed her eyes against the shock of it. Of course! No wonder Morgan did not lock Skyreach. It would never do for Dallas to be found with a key to Skyreach in her possession. So they played safe, and left it open. Janet looked down the hill from the kitchen window and saw the chimneys of Larch Hill.

All at once she couldn't see them for tears. Tears that she had to blink back. She dared not risk notice by getting out her handkerchief. She told herself fiercely she wasn't crying for herself, or because she loved him, but because she was disillusioned. Girls did fall in love with men who did not love them back, but it was dust and ashes in your mouth to know a man could seem so upright . . . and stoop so low.

She remained at the window till the tea was poured and she had control of herself. They sat at the kitchen table having it. It ought to have been fun. *On* the surface it was. But there was one regret that stayed with her, one that oddly enough seemed to hurt her more than anything . . . Thomas MacNee was going to take it badly when they broke it off.

When it was all over and she had taken a position at Tapanui Hospital, she would be allowed to visit them, no doubt, but there would be restraint among them. Nothing would ever be quite the same.

She noticed Morgan staring out of the window intently. Then he said, "I'll wash the cups up later. Uncle, I'll let you take Janet back. I'll stay up here and finish the job I started the other day."

His uncle looked surprised. "You won't have time before lunch. Come back with us and return later today."

"Oh, I'll drop in at Larch Hill for lunch. I often do if I'm up here. I want a word with Arnold anyway, about my boundary fence. There must be a break somewhere. Some of his sheep were on my property the other day. I think we'd better ride along it together—it must be in one of the gullies. I could borrow Dallas's mount."

His boundary. His property. Well, of course, she supposed he did manage Windrush Hill in the main. Thomas appeared to be leaving all the major decisions to Morgan these days. She still needed to have reservations about his acceptance of the triplets, evidently.

She glanced out of the window, then stiffened. She saw a Pontiac, coffee-coloured, coming down the Larch Hill drive, and waited till she saw it make the turn into the Skyreach Drive. How close they were. How convenient. She knew that Pontiac, she'd heard Tommy describing it lovingly the day of the tractor demonstration.

It was Dallas, of course. She must have seen the Land-Rover on the skyline. Very careless of Morgan. It was probably their signal.

Janet hesitated. She'd have liked to make an excuse to stay on, to bowl Morgan out, but there was Thomas to consider. Thomas wouldn't stand for hanky-panky of that sort.

She said to him quickly: "Uncle Thomas, I'd like to get back now. Rosemary has only one fault, she hates having to keep meals hot." She hated the look of relief on Morgan's face.

As they went down the hill, bumping unmercifully on *ruts* and rocks, Thomas said: "Rosemary gets married before long—I'm not having you worked to death. I don't know of anyone else we could get to help. Besides, Morgan won't always be patient. I think it's only because he felt the bairns needed to get settled in that's made him so easy-osy so far. I've written to that Hetty Sinclair you told me about. You said once she'd a sister in Oamaru she's not seen for donkey's ages. I asked Therese about her and for her address. I thought she might come out here as a housekeeper. The children already know and love her.

"I got a letter back yesterday to say she'll consider it. That she'd always wanted to emigrate but never found the courage, and now her brother is gone she'd like fine to be within reach of her sister. She's to think it out and let me know. I offered to fly her out, but she said if she does come it will be by ship." He chuckled reminiscently. "She said: 'I've no patience with all this craze for taking to the air with wings and engines.' I think I shall like your Hetty Sinclair."

Somehow Janet responded. She'd have *to get* this situation resolved and the engagement broken before Hetty got here. She wouldn't involve honest, down-to-earth Hetty in any deceit. Then, at least, there would be someone trustworthy to look after the triplets, when she herself left Windrush Hill.

As she entered the gate and looked back in the direction of Skyreach, bitterness and condemnation rose in her . . . behind that hill, in a house that had belonged to Morgan Mackay's forebears, a house that should have known only wholesome happiness and laughter, he met a friend's wife, secretly.

She told Rosemary that there would be only the three of them for lunch, that Morgan would be having his at Larch Hill as he had wanted to see Arnold Raymine.

Rosemary, all unknowing, turned the sword a little more. "He's due for a disappointment then. Mother rang me a little while ago to ask where I'd put her knitting pattern and she said Arnold was there and was staying to lunch. He wanted to ask Dad about some chap he'd heard of who was looking for a job."

It was almost dinner-time when Morgan came home.

Janet intended to meet his eyes with scorn, but unobserved by him, she saw him from the sitting-room window. He came wearily, and with a whitened, strained face. She'd never seen that darkly ruddy face pale before.

She sat very still, screened by the curtain, looking at him. He came up the terraced garden, braced against the strong wind that had sprung up and was buffeting the house, and paused by the sundial. He turned and stared out to the horizon, but it seemed to Janet as if he saw nothing. As if he wanted the wind in his face, clean and strong.

She was being fanciful, she knew, and she had no right to feel pity. It wasn't even logical. But Janet herself knew the anguish of loving hopelessly. Perhaps there was no rhyme or reason to loving. Perhaps he despaired as much over Dallas as she, Janet, despaired over him.

She wished she knew the whole story. She wished she could go to Thomas and ask why those two had not married. If it was because Morgan had no land in his own right that Dallas would not marry him—and had turned to Arnold?

But she couldn't, because though Thomas did seem much less of an autocrat than Cecile had pictured him, it could be that, disliking Dallas, he had threatened to disinherit Morgan.

Suddenly, watching Morgan, Janet was sure of one thing. If that had been the way of it, then it must have been Dallas who refused to marry Morgan, for she was certain that Morgan would never have given up the woman he loved for the sake of an inheritance. But Dallas wasn't one to love without counting the cost.

Janet felt a little happier as she went along to the kitchen to serve the dinner.

Morgan showered, changed, but came downstairs with still a slightly withdrawn, preoccupied air.

But he said quietly as he sat down, "Janet, I've got phone reserves for a film at Gore tonight. I thought it would be good for you—you've not been off the place since you came."

She could do nothing but acquiesce, though she dreaded the long drive each way alone with him, afraid of the silences betraying her into rash speech.

Thomas beamed. "That will give Janet a better idea of Windrush Hill. She must think it's all work and no play. These days we aren't half as remote as we used to be."

Morgan laughed. "In fact, sometimes the social whirl is so great I feel there's no such thing as a quiet country existence."

"Aye . . . unless you've a hankering for big city doings and canna settle, like some I know."

Morgan looked across at his uncle piercingly. "You mean Dallas, of course."

"Who else would I be meaning?"

Janet kept her eyes on her plate. She didn't want to look from one to the other. They'd be at loggerheads any moment.

Morgan said quietly, yet there seemed to be leashed feeling there, "Of course, she had those ten years up in Auckland just when she was at her most impressionable age. One must make allowances."

Thomas sounded grim. "I find it very hard to make allowances. If she didn't want to take Arnold's kind of life she ought not to have married him. But, of course, he's got the sort of income she likes. You couldn't see her settling in the suburbs on the basic wage, could you? And I daresay any city businessmen on the income level that would interest her were simply too shrewd to be taken in by her. Arnold is not in the least analytical.

He's been taken in by her colouring—which is only foxy when all's said and done. There's a lot of disillusionment ahead of him, I doubt."

"Not necessarily, Uncle. Actually, Arnold's got what it takes. I've seen him make Dallas toe the line. Oddly enough it's the one time when she really respects him."

"Then it's a pity he doesn't use real caveman methods," growled Thomas.

Therese beamed. "I do love conversations like this. I do hate it when grown-ups start saying things and then say: 'Oh, I forgot, little pitchers have big ears,' it's most insulting and frustrating.

Otherwise, how can children learn dis . . . dis . . . what's the word I want, Grandfather?"

He chuckled. "Discrimination. But dinna worry, lassie. I think children would instinctively dislike yon Dallas."

Fortunately at that moment Connal knocked his apple sponge clean into Tommy's lap, and in the ensuing mopping-up, Dallas, as a subject for conversation, was shelved.

CHAPTER TEN

THERESE later, watching Janet get ready, announced from her perch on the bed, "I do love Granddad. He says what he means, doesn't he? No humbug. And he doesn't go round like some people do, pretending all grown-ups are perfect. I know how he feels about Dallas. I feel like that too—all prickles."

Janet looked a little worried, stopped and sat down beside Therese. "I know, Tess, it's good to be able to speak your mind, but only if you don't hurt other people when you do."

Therese looked straight up into Janet's face. "You mean Morgan?"

Janet caught her breath. So even Therese had noticed!

She didn't know what to reply, but her hesitation was fortunate, for Therese swept on, "But you can't always like the ones your friends marry, *I suppose, so Morgan's* stupid if he feels he has to like Dallas just because Arnold is his friend!"

Janet felt a wave of love for Therese go over her. She just couldn't imagine anyone being fond of Dallas. Better that she should never suspect that Morgan had ever loved Dallas. Why should she? To Therese, Morgan was her stepsister's husband-to-be.

"Janet, you look lovely in that. You ought to wear scarlet more often. It gives you colour. Honestly, since you were sick you've sometimes looked just like death warmed up!"

Janet burst out laughing. "Therese! Wherever did you pick up such an expression?"

"From Mrs. McNeur. She uses gorgeous expressions. They're . . . um . . . dramatic. I've got a lot stored up and I'm just looking for opportunities to use them."

"Well, don't use them on me."

"I couldn't resist it . . . that's just what you've been like, Janet. Sort of frozen. You won't stay that way, will you? You used to be so bubbling over."

Janet turned her head away sharply, began twisting her hair up. "Oh, it's just that it takes a little while to regain your vitality, Therese, after an illness."

"Janet! You're putting your hair into a French pleat, like you did on board ship . . . you'd always said before when I wanted you to that it was too much trouble for a nurse."

"Well, now that I've not been near a hairdresser for a trim, I've just got to do something with it."

It suited her, gave her height. She could see that. And it made her look older. Quite a lot. Janet added a clear red lipstick, used a little colour. In spite of a heavy heart she was looking forward now to a night out after so long indoors.

"That big black belt and that swathed sort of skirt does something for your hips, Janet," announced Therese, her head on one side.

"It certainly does," said a voice from the door . . . Morgan's. Janet's colour deepened. She dared not take the admiration in his eyes, the caress in his voice for any other than the act he put on before everyone in this household.

Morgan came in, not asking permission. Therese wriggled hospitably along the bed. "Do sit down, Morgan, though she's nearly ready. Isn't Janet beautiful when she's all dressed up?"

"She's always beautiful," he said gravely.

Janet reached into the wardrobe for her coat.

"Yes, of course, Louis used to say she had the most beautiful skin tints he'd ever seen."

Heavens, that child!

Therese continued: "And I think it's all the nicer because it's natural. I mean Janet's not one for using too much make-up . . . she's got a bit extra on tonight, but then that's permissible, do you not think?"

She'd have to head Therese off... a slightly French accent and phrasing was overlaying the Scots burr, and when that happened she was a minx. Any moment now she'd say something disparaging about Dallas.

Janet said hastily: "Therese, see if you can find my black bag . . . the one with the tapestry pansies on. I don't want to take a big bag to a theatre."

Therese shot off the bed and began rummaging in a drawer.

Morgan said, "It's on the window-seat, Tess." He stood up, held out his hand for the coat Janet had taken off the hanger—black, with a little stand-up fur collar.

Therese watched them approvingly. Janet turned round and held out her arms. Morgan slipped it on, turned her back again and began fastening it beneath her chin.

Janet fixed her eyes on his paua shell tie-pin and tried to think about nothing. He was disturbingly near. Masculine fragrance—a blend of after-shave lotion, hair-oil and pipe tobacco—came down on her. She held herself rigid.

"Weren't you lucky, Morgan, getting someone like Janet?"

Therese always pursued a line of thought to the bitter end, no matter how often interrupted and headed off. "Pity Mr. Raymine hadn't had your sense. Well, he's made his bed, he'll just have to lie on it, as Mrs. McNeur says. We sow as we reap—oh, darn, I mean we reap as we sow. How true!" She heaved a sigh over the follies of mankind.

Janet went to turn away as Morgan did up the last button, but he kept hold of the coat. "*I was* lucky, Therese."

Therese's small face was uplifted to his. "Go on, Morgan, don't mind me . . . kiss her!"

Morgan burst out laughing, touched his lips lightly to Janet's cheek and said, "I was afraid to spoil the make-up."

"More likely afraid of getting lipstick on you," remarked Therese sagely, and Morgan gave her a slap. "You'll be a fair handful yourself when you grow up, Therese. We'd better be on our way."

It wasn't a bit necessary for him to take her arm on the spindled stairway, because Therese was skipping on ahead and couldn't see . . . perhaps he just enjoyed playing the escort. A thought struck

Janet. Even though Morgan loved Dallas, perhaps he was the type to find this pretence not unpleasant.

Was he a philanderer? Did he enjoy the occasional embrace, kiss, merely because he was a man and she a woman? Was there that difference in the attitude of men? Most women found delight in caresses only if behind it lay genuine emotion. The spirit had to be stirred before the senses.

Thomas and the boys had the Scrabble set on the table. They were waiting for Therese. Thomas looked up, his eye brightened.

"Now, this is something like! Janet, you look better than you've looked since you arrived. Positively blooming. My, but you've been peaky-looking."

"I know," she said demurely. "Like death warmed up, according to Therese." They all laughed, and Janet felt more natural.

"You've got plenty of rugs in the car?" asked Thomas.

"Yes . . . and that's a good heater." Morgan twinkled. "Trust me not to let her get cold, sir," and Janet kissed them all good night, and they were away.

All the way into Gore she managed to keep the talk general, mainly asking questions about New Zealand.

"When summer comes," said Morgan, "you'll see the answers to most of these questions yourself. Although it's a busy time on the station, we're so close to all the beauty spots here that it's possible to spend even just a day at some of them. And with the two Wiltshire boys and Angus Gunn working for us, it's possible to have two or three days off occasionally so we can get to the farther away ones.

"We'll do Milford Sound—you can see Lake Te Anau and the Eglinton and Hollyford Valleys on the way. They lead through breathtakingly beautiful native forests, rain forests, and towering heights, then down through a marvellous road tunnel—hewn through with wheelbarrow and pick and shovel—to Milford in Fiordland. Milford was named for Milford Haven. The colour is unbelievable.

"And at Te Anau the glow-worm caves, only discovered since 1948, are really something. You couldn't exhaust the beauties of Fiordland in a lifetime, with great lakes with, endless arms, forest tracks, some regions unexplored as yet. Then, closer at hand, Central Otago with its snow-fed lakes and rivers, and its blindingly hot summer heat and mountain peaks."

If I am here in summer, thought Janet. By summer we will have ended this farce and I will be nursing somewhere. I shan't really mind if Hetty Sinclair is looking after Windrush Hill and the children. A thought struck her . . . they could make her deception the cause of their staged quarrel and subsequent parting! Morgan could pretend to have just unmasked her.

If it were an ordinary lovers' tiff, Uncle Thomas would endeavour to patch it up. It was quite evident he wanted his nephew safely married and out of Dallas's clutches. And he did approve of Janet. He wouldn't, as Jeanne-Marie, the deceiver. He would expect Morgan to be angry about it, since Thomas would suppose Morgan to have fallen in love with Janet. Looked at from any angle it was a mess.

She thought twistedly, with wry amusement, that it was an example of crime not paying. She ought to have faced up to the anguish of letting the children come alone, following later, as herself, and trusting to lowering their prejudices, their

preconceived ideas of her as a stepsister with an eye to the main chance.

But she could still recall her utter dismay at the thought of children facing an autocratic, strange grandfather and the formidable Elvira, alone. She hadn't known how Thomas had mellowed, how approachable he was ... if indeed he had ever been the autocrat Cecile had made him to be. Perhaps Cecile had not been patient enough. Perhaps the life had been too different. Especially with three babies to care for.

They drew up at the theatre.

They had supper after leaving the film. Janet had protested, "I'd just as soon have it at home."

"Too far. We'll have some coffee when we get home. Thomas said he'd fill the flask-jug. I think you need feeding up a little and often, Janet." He grinned. "Can't have my fiancée looking like death warmed up."

She laughed herself. "Therese is spending so much time at McNeur's. She and Cathy McNeur are great pals. But she's fascinated by Mrs. Mac's colourful speech. I realise now how much we've heard of it. She was talking about that rather lugubrious-looking Miss Martindore—I met her at the tractor display—and said she was like grief on a tombstone.

"And that Saturday that she and Catherine had planned to ride into Tapanui on the ponies and it rained, she got a little consolation out of saying: 'Man proposes and God *disposes*.' For myself I think that's a horribly depressing saying . . . talk about creating a false image of God! It makes one think of Him as a real spoil-sport. But with Therese it's just a case of picturesque language."

They ordered hot cheese rolls and tea. As Morgan bit into one he chuckled. "She certainly does! I hadn't realised she was in the loft the other day reading a book, and Angus and I were fixing a mattress of his that he'd brought over for tautening. I did tell him I thought it a job for an expert, but no, he's a confirmed do-it-yourselfer. He had some quaint idea of using our clamps and what-not for it. We'd got the darned thing nearly right when all of a sudden one of the clamps slipped off and Angus didn't get his hand away in time! The air was blue! Never heard even Angus give such a performance.

"After a bit he went off to the implement shed to get something he'd left there and Therese's head appears, upside-down, from the manhole.

" 'My word, what a command of language that man has, to be sure,' she said. I was rather appalled and told her she wasn't to repeat any of it."

It was all so harmonious, so family-minded, so disarming. This was what it might have been like, if Morgan hadn't loved Dallas, if he hadn't despised her. If she hadn't despised him.

Of course Dallas—women like Dallas—could wield a certain power. They could make havoc of men's lives. Even ones who knew Dallas would never look at them, like Mrs. McNeur's nephew, a simple country lad, who'd dreamed impossible dreams and had been laughed at, were attracted. It did something to a boy, from which he might be a long time recovering. She wondered what Morgan had been like before he fell in love with Dallas. . . .

The words were out before she thought. "Morgan, how long have you known Dallas?"

His brows came down, then went back to normal. She thought his tone was purposely casual. "Since she was in Primer One and I was in Standard One. Arnold, of course, was a High School boy by then and always a hero of mine. He was very good to a small boy who would tag on. Together we've explored and hunted over almost every bit of forest and swampland. We were here for some time when I was small—up in the old cottage at Skyreach." He grinned. "Right from her first day at school Dallas caused heart-burning among the boys. They all wanted to sharpen her pencils, carry her schoolbag. Then her people moved to Auckland. Dallas's mother is very like her. Couldn't stand it here. Her father managed to get a farm on the outskirts of Auckland. He has a manager on it and goes out to it every day. They live in the city. Dallas was sometimes back here for holidays. And she finally married Arnold."

Janet decided on candour, even if he set her back.

"Why?"

"What do you mean . . . why?"

"Why did she marry him?"

The hazel-green eyes looked directly into hers. "I wouldn't get away with saying: 'For the usual reasons, I suppose,' would I, Janet?"

"No, you wouldn't. I've no use for humbug. Perhaps Therese gets her love of direct speech from being with me so much. The usual reason is love. And it's not a love-match."

They measured glances.

Janet said: "Why *did* she marry him, Morgan?"

He said slowly: "Dallas isn't the type to marry for love, Janet. You can see that for yourself. She's not a poor man's wife. Even Arnold knows that."

"You mean he knows she married him for his money?"

"I mean he knows that she would only marry where money was. There is a difference."

"Not one that I can appreciate."

"I suppose not. You've had to fight for yourself, Janet. Dallas was hopelessly spoiled. Any man who loves her must love her in spite of that. She's not a popular creature with women, Janet, I know . . . but men find her fascinating."

"Isn't Arnold going to be disillusioned some day?"

Morgan frowned. "I . . . don't think so. I always had the feeling that of all the local chaps who fell for her, Arnold knew her for what she was and loved her just the same. I think he thought this world tour might take the restlessness out of her. It hasn't."

"You mean -"

"I mean she's still crying for the moon. But she'll have to grow up some day, shoulder her responsibilities."

Janet was startled, looked up into Morgan's face. She'd been playing with crumbs on her plate. But Morgan had turned his face away and was saying across the next table which was empty, to the far one, "Oh, hullo, Jock, I've not seen you since I got back. Come and join us."

Jock Michaelson and his wife Flora were delighted to meet Morgan Mackay's fiancée. Janet slipped back into her role, finding it easier because she liked these people; because, for the first time, she thought Morgan might be trying or intending to break away from his attachment to Dallas.

As Morgan settled the rugs round her in the car and said: "You may find them necessary till the heater warms up," she thought calmly that she would probably find it reasonably easy to guide the conversation back to where they had left it off.

But as they went over the Mataura River and headed north, Morgan said: "Janet, let's not go back to discussing Dallas and Arnold. That wasn't in my mind when I brought you out. It was for sheer pleasure. A comedy like that—which we enjoyed so much—shouldn't induce a mood of probing and retrospection. Let's forget it."

There was a limit to how much you could probe a man's inner feelings. Everybody deserved some privacy. And if he had decided to finish with Dallas, he wouldn't want to talk about it. Men didn't.

"Very well, Morgan," she said quietly.

It was a glorious night, rapier-cold outside, frost gleaming on every stalk of cocksfoot seen in the headlights, winking from farmhouse roofs and wrought-iron gates like diamonds, stars above icily splendid, the Milky Way a far radiance, the full moon pale and remote above the mountains.

Janet felt peace seep into her just as the warmth was seeping in to her. All at once she realised they had left the Macadam tarseal as they called it here, and were on gravel and climbing.

"Morgan, where are we going?"

"There's enough light tonight to show you a wonderful view. I'll let you see it by daylight some time, but it's one of my favourite spots even by night."

The road climbed and twisted. Janet didn't see a single farmhouse or turnoff. They came to the hill-top, marked by a trig station. The road dipped down into darkness, but Morgan stopped, turned the car slowly on to the turf verge that widened here and stopped with its nose almost against the barbed wire fence.

"It gives one a godlike feeling," he said. "They just call it Trig Hill around here, but even when I was a lad it was Mount Olympus to me. You feel as if you're on the roof of the world. Can you bear the cold for a few moments?"

She could.

They walked to the fence. Out east they could see the dark line that was the earth, meeting a faint line that was surf, and a moon-track across sable-dark waters. Farther south the lights of a ship, dwarfed by distance, glimmered faintly on its way to Bluff Harbour.

Morgan turned her round to look down the other way. "But down there, and beyond, is *my* land. My secret delight as a boy. Some of my forebears mapped it out, hill by hill, gully by gully, swamp by swamp . . . deep in the forests. That's it there, that darker line below . . . the great edge of the forest. In the summer when it's not quite so dangerous, long after the spring has thawed the snows and they no longer deepen the morasses to danger threats, we'll take the children tramping. It's their heritage now and they must know all its hazards, its secrets."

He said "we". Did he mean just himself and the children? Or meaning her too?

But she didn't interrupt. This was the Morgan she wanted to know. Not the Morgan who met his friend's wife in secret, who had faked an engagement so that his friend would not guess.

Morgan pointed out places she could scarcely distinguish, recalled adventures, described the birds they would see, the wild pigs, the opossums, the deer, till suddenly he put the back of his hand against her cheek, found it icy and said, "Let's get back in the car."

He tucked her in with the rugs, but instead of switching on the ignition, he moved a little nearer her. She looked up, a little startled. He smiled down on her, slipped an arm round her shoulders.

Janet sat bolt upright. "Morgan, there's no use in pretending now—we don't need to play a part when there's no one here."

His smile was lazy and had reached his eyes. "Who said it was playing a part?"

"It has to be. There's nothing but pretence between us." She stopped, swallowed, felt breathless, plunged on, "Just because I allowed you to bring me here to your usual"—she hesitated, then went on—"your usual place for parking, that didn't mean I was ready to let you -" She stopped.

"To let me make love to you? Was that what you were going to say, Janet?"

"Yes. I mean the whole thing is perfectly ridiculous. Here we are, each distrusting the other, despising the other. It's just a mockery, cheap and insulting. It's -"

His hand covered her lips, but only gently, warningly. "Janet, don't go on saying things like that. They just all arise out of my rage when I first discovered you had deceived me, when you pretended you were just a friend taking care of the children and not their stepsister. I admit I lost my temper, accused you of all sorts of things which I now know you're not capable of even thinking. I realise we had built up the idea of a daughter of Louis Fremont's who would be bound to have a temperament like Cecile.

"My uncle was afraid of history repeating itself, that the children would never settle at Windrush Hill if someone who loved France and would be homesick for it came with them. It was for the children's ultimate happiness. And he thought—wrongly, I now think—that Louis Fremont was a footloose impoverished artist with little or no responsibility, who had probably lived on the allowance he paid for the children to Cecile . . . and that his daughter would be of the same ilk.

"I've a quick temper, I know. And you'd seemed so open and without guile. I was horribly disappointed in you. In the heat of the moment I judged you by what we had mistakenly judged Jeanne-Marie to be. That, plus the fact you seemed to be very keen to know if I was the heir to Windrush Hill. Perhaps the knowledge that Dallas, too, can look so ravishingly beautiful yet put money first had soured me on the subject. I thought you, too -"

He stopped. Janet looked up at him. Her mind was in a whirl. At last they were discussing it. So Dallas *had* turned him down because Arnold was the richer.

He possessed himself of both her hands, moving his a little over them as if he would imbue her with warmth. It was somehow disarming.

He went on, "But I don't now. I know you couldn't be capable of anything so calculating. These weeks lived closely together at Windrush Hill have taught me that everything you do for the children is disinterested, that you seek only their good. Children who are related to you only very loosely through marriage. So I'm apologising to you for every harsh word I spoke to you on board ship. And that's why I've -"

There was such a long pause that Janet looked right up into his eyes. Till now Morgan had been talking to her with bent head, as if he wanted no distractions. His eyes held hers, they were very grave. She prompted him, since he seemed to forget he'd not finished his sentence. And she very badly wanted to hear the end.

"That's why you've . . . what?"

"That's why I've found the courage now to ask you if we couldn't, after all, make this reality, Janet? Go ahead with this engagement, plan a marriage for next year, after harvest?"

Janet gave a little choke. It was between laughter and tears. "What a strange proposal, Morgan! Do you really expect me to accept something as cold-blooded as that? You might be arranging a business proposition. 'Let's ratify our tentative arrangements, Miss MacGregor. After harvest would be a suitable time.' No, thank you, Mr. Mackay. No time would be suitable for me to wed *you*. My idea of a proposal is——"

He caught her against him, brought his head down, found her mouth. Janet was aware of the thudding of her heart, the racing of her pulses, the compulsion to stay in his arms that she must resist with everything in her . . . the utter ecstasy and pain of it, the humiliation!

She looked up when finally he lifted his lips from hers to find him laughing a little. His eyes . . . no, she could not read their expression.

"Is that the way you wanted it, Janet? Of course, every girl would. What a bungler I am . . . not that I wanted to do it the way I did, but with so much misunderstanding between us I felt I had to clear the decks first. Janet -"

But this time she had *her* hand against *his* mouth. "Morgan, stop it! How dare you! It's an insult. Thinking I wanted you to kiss me! I was going to say my idea of a proposal isn't the sort of bargain we agreed to first; it isn't this—a second-best, lukewarm thing—it's finding yourself in love first, with someone you can trust. Someone who would be kind to you, love you, cherish you. Someone who could bring you enchantment. Someone to make your eyes light up and your heart beat faster. I could never trust you like that. I could never believe in you again. I'd never marry anyone I had no faith in. You only want a farmer's wife, someone to fill the gap in that empty house up at Skyreach. You despised me once, but by now your native good sense has asserted itself.

"You think that—domestically—I'd make a good wife. Morgan, no! Don't protest. I'm not as easily gulled as that. You thought it wise to betray a little masculine interest in me, pep up the romantic angle. Perhaps even to deceive yourself.' It won't be long now, Morgan, till we break this travesty of an engagement. Thomas is sending for Hetty Sinclair. I won't involve anyone else in that stupid deceit of mine. Only I can't walk out and leave the children without anyone, or Thomas without a housekeeper.

"But just before Hetty gets here you and I will have a flaming row. You can find out who I really am. It will be a watertight excuse. It will put you in a very favourable light. Nobody need ever know

that you persuaded me into this because you didn't want Arnold suspecting. Oh, no, you can remain the example of rectitude everyone round here thinks you are. You can break it off because you've been grossly deceived, not telling you I was the undesirable stepsister no one wanted at Windrush Hill.

"Till Hetty Sinclair's ship berths at Wellington I'll have to put up with being engaged to you, with acting a devotion that's completely the reverse of the feelings I have towards you—but it won't last a moment longer than I can help. Now drive on."

Morgan, lips compressed, switched on the ignition, pressed the self-starter and took the rough downhill road home.

There wasn't a single word exchanged between them for the rest of the way. They came into the house together, looked at Thomas's preparations for their return, the glowing fire that had been built to last, the flash-jug with the coffee on a small table, two exquisite cups and saucers, a plate of biscuits. He had drawn two big winged chairs close together.

Janet said tightly, "I'll pour the coffee down the sink so he won't know. Good night."

He drew in a deep, restrained breath. "Women seem to get over these things more quickly than men. I don't even feel like bidding you a civil good night at the moment, but heaven preserve me from giving you the impression that added to my other sins is the one of sulkiness. So—good night." He turned at the door. "No doubt by tomorrow morning I'll have found the grace to treat you in a manner to deceive my uncle and the triplets." His tone sounded completely weary.

Janet told herself as she undressed that she ought at last to feel some satisfaction that she had told Morgan a few home-truths.

Most girls would feel that after being forced into an engagement like this. But she didn't. She felt unutterably miserable. Lost. Lonely.

And her mind would keep wondering how it might have gone had she accepted his offer. A horrible thought came to mock her. Morgan had looked very strained on his return from Skyreach. Was it possible that he had broken with Dallas? Had he told her their meetings must cease?

Had he thought that he must pick up—at last—the broken threads of his life and settle down to an ordinary existence of his own, with a wife? Suddenly Janet was sure that was it. But she couldn't turn the clock back. She wouldn't get a second chance.

Now, when it was too late, all she wanted to do was to serve the man she loved. If she had said she would marry him, if she had been wise enough to know that it was possible to help him fight this thing, to assist him to forget the bewitching Dallas, in time they might have found a great happiness together, never perhaps reaching the heights, but achieving something that would be very fine in itself. Finally, exhaustedly, she slept.

The everyday routine carried her over the next few days, outwardly the same to Morgan as ever she had been.

There was to be a wool-shed dance at the McNeurs'. "Our worst snowfalls often come late in July—sometimes even August—so we'll take the chance while we can. Spring often comes with a rush here, and once lambing starts it's no time till Christmas—hardly a breather between lambing finishing and shearing starting."

Janet said to Morgan one morning when she took the morning tea over to the implement shed and found him alone, "Do I have to go to this dance? I'm not really part of the district for very long. Hetty arrives in October and I thought I'd make an excuse, a headache or a cold coming."

"You can't. They're making this an official welcome-back party for the Raymines and us."

Janet said drearily: "I feel as if I've been here years, not like just arriving. Time is dragging."

He looked at her sharply. "Not settling? Are you homesick for Scotland? Do you -"

"I'm not particularly homesick for Scotland. I've no one of my own there now. This is as good a place as anywhere to build a new life. But I'll be glad when Hetty is here and I can get away. What I need is my own work, people needing what nursing skill I possess. I saw the matron at Tapanui the other day. We had a chat about differences and similarities here and in Scotland in the nursing profession."

Morgan said quickly: "You didn't hint you might be wanting a job—later?"

"Of course not. I'll see it through, wait till I break our pseudo-engagement. I wish I didn't have to go to this barn-dance."

"You'll make out all right. You have so far. I think we've both done pretty well. I'm a convincingly devoted lover when folk are about, and you respond fairly well—mechanically, I suppose. Nobody but myself could guess you hate every minute of it. You'll come to that dance and respond to every kindly gesture. The folk here have thought the world of you ever since you saved the

situation on the day of the Prime Minister's luncheon and they would be most disappointed. Wear that blue frock you wore on board ship."

Which had the odd effect of sending Janet off to Dunedin for a new frock. She intended to go by bus, but Thomas wouldn't hear of it. He made her take the smaller car.

Janet returned completely satisfied with her purchase. It was more sophisticated than anything she had ever owned. It was a dark-brown gauze over a brown and emerald shot taffeta undergown, slim-fitting, with a redingote effect. The saleswoman suggested a rope of green beads to go with it and a matching pin to slot through her French pleat, much more sophisticated than Therese's daisy-chain clasp.

She was conscious of looking her best as she came down the stairs, something that could carry you through, even when you knew you had a heart so leaden it, at least, would never dance again.

Alice McNeur, married to a nephew of Sadie McNeur, and her husband, were going to stay the night at Windrush Hill and look after the triplets. Alice was expecting their first baby and past dancing.

Morgan was standing at the mantel, one hand on it, his back to her. He swung round and the look in his eyes gave Janet a minor triumph.

He spoke very naturally. "Janet, that's a knockout!"

Thomas smiled, "She does Windrush Hill credit, doesn't she?"

Morgan sighed. "Look here, Uncle, who is she engaged to . . . you or me? Does she belong to Windrush Hill or Skyreach? I know

what's going to happen . . . most of your dances will go to Thomas MacNee, Janet. These blessed MacGregors hang together. And I must admit it, he's the best dancer in the district."

Janet's eyes opened wide. Morgan laughed, "Your surprise is not complimentary to Uncle."

Janet, aware that everyone's eyes were on her, said lightly, "Your own magnificence holds me spellbound."

True enough. Morgan had the legs and the shoulders for kilt and doublet. Janet found her heart behaving bumpily. How absurd! She'd always thought it stupid to fall for a uniform. She'd been convincing herself, these last three weeks, that she was getting over him.

She found it impossible not to enjoy herself with these people. They had taken her to their hearts and she was one with them. As Dallas would never be, though the younger, more impressionable men fluttered round her and vied for her dances.

Janet knew an itching of the feet as soon as the skirl of the pipes began. There were accordions too, and a couple of fiddles.

When she was dancing with Arnold he said to her, "They might as well have made this a farewell party to us, too."

She missed a step, which Arnold corrected adroitly for her.

"What do you mean, Arnold?"

He looked surprised. "Hasn't Morgan told you? I did say to keep it to himself meanwhile, but I thought with you two being engaged, he'd be bound to say. I just meant, don't spread it abroad till it's finalised. Dallas's father is retiring. He has a farm near Auckland.

He's got a manager on it. I'm taking over. We can live in Auckland. It's only fifteen miles out. There isn't enough here for Dallas. She's always loved Auckland."

Arnold had probably told Morgan the day he had shown Janet Skyreach. Janet knew he had gone back to Larch Hill before Morgan left there, because together they'd found the breach in the fence.

That would be why Morgan had proposed to Janet that night, why he had looked bleak on his return. Because Dallas was going out of his life.

And he had known Skyreach needed a mistress. At the thought of Skyreach Janet's heart contracted painfully. That lovely house, incorporating the old and the new with a charm gathered from each, deep in its shelter belt of larches and pines. Skyreach with its little secret dream garden of herbs. One that would never be fashioned now, since she, Janet, would never live there. Janet wondered had she known Dallas was leaving the district, might she have found the courage to accept Morgan; to trust that in the years to come a quiet love, if never a strong passion, might flower between them. She didn't know. Only -

She had the supper dance with Morgan. "How long do these dances go on?"

"Usually just a couple of dances after this, but they've got something special on this time, in place of those two dances. There's to be a—a sort of presentation, then just Auld Lang Syne."

"A presentation . . . who to?"

He smiled, and it was the first time Janet had ever seen him nervous and trying to cover up. "You must believe me, Janet, when

I say that until a few moments ago I had no idea. Though I don't see what I could have done about it, in any case. It—I—it's to you and me. An engagement dance. I'm afraid they've got a whole lot of presents here for Skyreach. I'm sorry, Janet. Listen, will you play it up, girl? For their sakes? Make all the customary responses and jokes? I'll back you up. Here it comes now, I'm afraid."

He kept hold of her hand, squeezed her limp fingers. It was just as he said, nothing to be done about it. It was a wealthy district and the gifts were almost like wedding presents.

Somehow Janet managed to register incredulous delight, say the right thing about every lovely gift . . . glassware, china, kitchen utensils, lovely boxed linen, even a huge case of preserved fruit, with someone saying that when Morgan had said he'd probably get wed come harvest, they'd realised Janet wouldn't have time to bottle much.

Janet told herself that these things would, some day, grace Skyreach, that they were being given because all his life Morgan had been known and respected here. He would, in time, marry. Most men did, even if they did not marry their first loves. But it was going to be very embarrassing. As bad as sending back presents for a marriage that hadn't come off.

Morgan said to her once, in an aside, "Good girl! You're doing fine, Janet. Keep it up, I'm proud of you."

That was something. It was the nearest to friendliness (apart from all the acts they put on to keep people believing in this horrible farce of an engagement) that he had shown her since the night they went to Gore.

She was dimly aware that Dallas was hating every moment of this, but she didn't care.

Going home in the station wagon, with every inch of it piled high with the presents, and Thomas having gone before them in someone else's car to leave room for a few parcels on the seat beside Janet, she felt almost as if everybody and everything combined to rush her, willy-nilly, towards a wedding come harvest.

They went very slowly over the rough roads. As they turned into one of the garages, Janet said in a voice stripped of emotion, "Morgan, what are we going to do with them?"

"Leave them as they are tonight and take them up to Skyreach tomorrow."

She made an impatient sound. "I didn't mean now, I mean eventually."

He said gently, "Janet, it's three o'clock in the morning—no time to discuss this. Besides, let's leave it till Hetty Sinclair arrives. Come up with me to Skyreach tomorrow to stow it. Uncle Thomas will think us an unsentimental couple otherwise."

Janet's lips felt stiff. "Will these things be safe up there?"

"Yes. I lock it now."

Since when? she wondered.

Neither of them were at ease when they put the things away. It gave Janet a queer feeling to be arranging jars of ruby-red plums, golden-pink quinces, pulped apple, tomatoes, apricots, peaches and pears, and jars and jars of jam on shelves that would never be hers. To be standing on a stool, having Morgan hand up to her cups and

saucers, ornaments and jugs, to place in the curved china cabinets that were built into the alcoves on each side of the fireplace that graced the big drawing-room, seemed unreal.

The fireplace was of multi-coloured Wakatipu stone, with here and there West Coast stone that had glinting mica in it. In the pale winter sunlight some of it winked back at her, and she felt a physical anguish at the thought that she would never see firelight reflected in it.

As she put some kitchen cups and saucers in the cupboards she noticed all the original cups were clean now.

"Shall we make ourselves a cup of tea now?" asked Morgan.

She shook her head. "I'd sooner have it down home."

Well, Windrush Hill *was* home—temporarily—and Skyreach never would be, for Janet MacGregor.

When they came out Morgan locked the back door with the most enormous key Janet had ever seen. She said so.

He looked down on it, lying across his calloused palm. "You don't get them this big these days. This kind can never let the door slam on you, shutting you out. Before I came back here to work, Mother used to bring us here for the school holidays. I used to like turning this key in the lock at night, shutting out the terrific gales of May and August. I always feel it spells security to me. We had a man here then, a bachelor. Mother used to give this place a thorough turning out twice a year. I leave this up here. It's better than coming all this way up and finding you've forgotten the key. I'll show you where I put it, Janet."

They went across to the old wash-house that had been separate from the cottage and she watched him hang it on the side of one of the great wooden tubs, close to the wall.

"It *is* a safe place," she admitted, "as long as you don't show anyone where you keep it."

He looked at her rather strangely, she thought, as if he sensed something. Then he said quietly: "Except for Uncle Thomas nobody knows but you and me, Janet."

He led the way round the side of the house past the little balcony from the bedroom. Janet stopped. There was a wistaria plant, just one foot high, newly planted, against the wrought iron of the balcony rail, and a half-drum protected it till it should root properly. A stack of flagstones was piled under some trees and a couple of dozen of them, all of the split multi-coloured Wakatipu stone, were arranged about the steps. One or two herbs and creeping plants were already in the cracks.

Morgan said nonchalantly, "Thought it a jolly good idea of yours. And there's nothing like starting it right away. It takes time to get a garden established."

Janet nodded. She couldn't trust her voice. So there *would* be a herb garden here . . . but she would never walk by it in the twilight or the early mornings, her ankles brushing against the borders of lavender, the perfume rising on the enchanted highland air.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE next day Morgan was away in Gore, and Thomas called her into his own den. He was at his desk, doing farm accounts, she supposed.

She sat down at his request and waited because he seemed diffident to start.

"What is it, Uncle Thomas? Something not right about the housekeeping accounts?"

He smiled at her in the affectionate way that always stabbed at her because it reminded her that she had won his respect and love through a deception.

"No, lass. I've strongly suspected since you've controlled the housekeeping that yon Elvira feathered her nest there—the bills were much larger. Yet it wasn't because she was lavish, for she was thrifty enough, never wasteful. But it took so much more to run the house, I realise she probably lined her pockets at my expense. No, I wanted to discuss the future with you—the children."

Janet looked vaguely apprehensive.

"I thought as someone who loves them dearly you ought to know what I intend. I hope to see them grow up, but sometimes death comes suddenly. No, no, lassie, don't look like that. Though it's a compliment to me that you should. I've always felt a man should have his affairs in order right through his life. Through rather tragic circumstances I've had to change my will twice. First I lost Isabel, then Alasdair.

"I think it's quite evident both Thomas and Connal are cut out for farming, but I would never tie anyone down to a way of life. They may change between now and twenty. I'm making this will fairly flexible, guided by my lawyer. I'm making Morgan my executor, of course, and yourself. If I die when the boys are young, Morgan can run it, with a capable man, till they take over. If I don't I'll deed it to them when they're twenty. Responsibility is good for young men. I was running this place at nineteen!"

"It will be divided between them equally. I'll have no bitterness growing up between two brothers merely because one came into the world twenty minutes before the other. I'm putting money into a trust fund for Therese that will equal the boys' shares. I've advised—though not insisted upon—the boys dividing the estate. The day of the big runs is over. You probably realise Windrush Hill is smaller than it was in pioneer days. But it will still make two good farms.

"But there is something I wish you to allow me to do. I want to make you a monetary gift. Actually, I've already instructed my lawyer to draw up a deed of gift. I so much appreciate what you have done—and are still doing—for my grandchildren. You gave up your own career, left your own country and came out here.

"You probably planned to do just that, long before you met and fell in love with Morgan. And your engagement to him means more to me than I can ever tell you. The way you pitched in when we had a domestic crisis on left me in your debt." He held up his hand as Janet uttered a protesting sound. "No, I'm not trying to pay you for that, I wouldna' so insult you. It is out of the fullness of my heart I want you to have this. It will do for your trousseau and it's enough for a substantial nest-egg for you. I'm not one who likes a woman to be utterly dependent upon her husband. And I've never been one to admire a man shelling out only after he's dead and gone. I like to

see the pleasure money can bring, and not at all keen about anyone thinking how well off they'll be when I'm gone, so I've not made it a legacy ... I want you to have it now." He broke off, aware of a strange look on Janet's face, that the blue eyes were filling with tears. "Now, what's the matter, lass?"

She stood up and in her agitation didn't call him uncle. Perhaps it was some subconscious realisation that she had no right to. Two emotions were warring within her, and the stronger one won . . . the right to see that Morgan got what he was entitled to, deserved!

"Mr. MacNee . . . I'll refer to your gift to me in a moment, but there is something I must know, must ask. Morgan . . . where does he come in? I know he's not in the line of straight descent, but—all these years that he has worked at Windrush Hill—he must have thought—it's only his right that he should have something. You're so wonderfully fair to the boys—equal rights I've always believed in if all members of a family are equally deserving—but won't it make Morgan resent the two boys? And he's been so wonderfully kind to them, I mean if they—in the future—are the owners of Windrush Hill and he's just the—just the hired man, drawing a wage?"

Her agitation had pulled her to her feet. The tears she was trying to check lay on her cheeks. Thomas's brown eyes were puzzled. He stood up, thrusting his chair behind him, and strode round the desk, taking her by the elbows.

"Keep and save us all, lassie, what's this stramashing about? What in the world has that daft lad Morgan been about to keep you—his promised wife—in the dark about his true position? My nephew needs no financial aid from me—nor would he take it, knowing Windrush Hill has three heirs. Why would the owner of Skyreach need anything from Windrush Hill? It's exactly half!"

The blue eyes closed, opened, looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I just don't understand. Doesn't Morgan work for you?"

Thomas put his arm round her, got out his handkerchief, roughly dabbed at her tears, "Lassie, I canna bear to see you weep. I never thought I should. You're such a wee bit creature and you look so—so ethereal—but inside you're an Amazon." He looked into her face and smiled, the creases in his wrinkled brown cheeks deepening.

"I thought you'd have known before you came here. What Morgan can ha' been thinking of not to tell you when he first asked you to be his wife, I don't know. He ought to have put his whole financial position before you then. I'll sort him." Suddenly his face cleared and he snapped his fingers. "I've got it ... he took a scunner at women wi' an eye to the main chance. No wonder!"

Janet cut in before he could get going again, her voice clear and decisive. "You mean because of Dallas?"

Thomas beamed on her. "Aye. What else? Enough to sicken any lad, that was. He was darned lucky to get you. Poor Arnold! I can see he's told you. Sensible lad—in that if not in everything. He ought to have known from the start that you were a cat of a different colour. That *you'd* not marry for money. I knew you for what you were, by the time you'd been here two hours! No guile in you. Oh, well, I've lived a lot longer than him, and while first impressions are not always reliable when you're young, when you're older they are backed up by sounder judgement."

No guile in her. It twisted the knife. And in a moment she must tell him. Janet felt sick.

Thomas went on chuckling. "I'll tell that nephew of mine he's not made for high intrigue. Fancy the cunning devil not telling you we run the two estates as one. Morgan's came to him through his mother, my sister. My own father believed in treating all children equally. But she married a schoolmaster. They lived up there for a while, when he took Balloch school. She loved the land passionately, but—wise woman—loved her man more. At times, you know, love of land has broken up family relationships. Chris didn't insist they run the place themselves, they got a manager in, a funny old chap who lived by himself. She had an idea her son might want to go farming.

"He never thought of anything else. Went off to Lincoln College and came back here crammed full of new ideas. Both places have benefited. Morgan and I have always been very close. He came here—to the house—to bear me company, though Elvira was a sore trial to him. We've been great pals despite the different generations. But really, for an open chap like Morgan to act like this is beyond my comprehension. Now, is all that cleared up?"

Janet's head was spinning. Yes, cleared up in so far that she knew now Morgan had never been the heir to Windrush Hill. But if he owned Skyreach, how was it Dallas could not bring herself to marry him? And he loved her, even to the extent of going on loving her when—in honourable ways—she was lost to him. Was Arnold as much richer as all that? Could anything else be involved?

Or was it that Dallas had known that she could sway Arnold as she would never have been able to sway Morgan? That she knew she'd succeed in getting Arnold to take up the land near Auckland, but would never be able to part Morgan from Skyreach? Janet didn't know. Besides, there was no time just now. She must try to thank

Thomas MacNee for his generous gift—the gift that she could not, must not take.

She walked across to the window, stood looking out at the garden on its terraces . . . the evidences of spring coming, bulbs pushing up through the hard rimed earth, the willows with their branches golden-red with swelling buds, and beyond them to the paddocks where the ewes were getting a little rotund now . . . which were Morgan's and which were Thomas's she didn't know.

Thomas waited at the end of his desk, watching her, a little smile on his lips.

She swung round. He said, apprehensively, as he took in the look on her face, "Now, Janet, you mustn't go for Morgan over this. I know he's not treated you well over it, but I don't doubt, knowing him so well, he's got his reasons. Don't rush it. Don't storm at him. Take him away by himself. Go away up to your own house with him where you'll not be interrupted by door-bell or telephone or bairns and well-meaning uncles!

"Or take a walk, the two of you, up to the tarn above Skyreach . . . Morgan hasn't shown you it yet . . . the-Flower-of-the-Sky. It's one of the loveliest places in West Otago. Though mebbe it's not the day for that ... I think there's weather coming."

He paused, added, "Now, lass, promise me you'll do nothing rash—that you'll try to understand why he's done this thing?"

Janet shook her head a little. She knew why Morgan had done it—because theirs was only a mock engagement and financial security in marriage had been nothing to do with her—it didn't matter. Because she wasn't marrying him. But there was one thing she must do.

She came to Thomas, took his gnarled old hands in hers, looked up into the concerned brown eyes and said flatly: "Mr. MacNee, you—what you've just done telling me about that deed of gift—has touched me to the quick. But it has also done something else . . . made me more than ever deeply ashamed. I can't take it. I'm here under false pretences. You think I'm pretty wonderful because you think I'm a perfect stranger to those children—that I just took them under my wing when their parents died—but I'm not. I didn't do it out of sheer goodness of heart. I did it because I'm—"

"Because you are Jeanne-Marie . . . their stepsister." said Thomas MacNee, and burst into a huge guffaw of laughter.

Janet stared wildly at him, dropped into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

Thomas sobered immediately. She felt his hands on her hair, gentle and caressing. She looked up and at the bewilderment he saw in her eyes, Thomas laughed again. "My, but you're a game one. Good for you—you weren't going to let the children come out here to an unknown quantity of a grandfather that no doubt from Cecile you imagined a real curmudgeon. Och, but I've aye liked a bit of spunk!

"It looks to me as if both you and Morgan will have to do a bit of slate-washing. You'd better both confess your secrets and decide to forgive each other. I've nearly given the show away a dozen times. Have you never noticed how often I started to say to one or other of the triplets, 'Go and ask your sister'? I've stopped at the 'your' so often it's a wonder they didn't notice it."

Janet swallowed. "Why didn't you bowl me out?"

The eyes watching her softened. "Because I thought you would tell me in your own good time . . . when you thought enough of me,

understood me well enough to know I couldn't be angry with you. Because I knew that with a face as open as yours, some day you'd find the whole thing intolerable."

"Oh, I have, Uncle Thomas, I have, so often," choked Janet.

He stood beside her, patting her shoulder.

She looked up. "How did you find out? From the solicitor?"

"I knew the moment you got out of the car, Janet. I almost gave the show away then. Do you remember Morgan thought the surprise on my face was because I thought that you looked far too young to be a district nurse? That saved the situation for me." Thomas went round the other side of his desk, slid a drawer open, put in his hand, and, drawing out a framed photograph, held it out to her.

"Do you recall the day, Janet, when you asked me— looking at the faded patch on this study wall—what had hung there. I said a photo with a cracked glass I was having replaced. It was this."

She gazed at it. This photograph had been taken in Spain, one printed from a colour slide. And just as that day had been splashed with colour, clear and bright, their own colouring stood out vividly. It was herself, Therese, Connal and Thomas. She hadn't known Cecile had sent it to her father-in-law with one of her duty letters, reporting the progress at school of the triplets in exchange for their allowance.

Thomas said: "She had written your names on the back. You can't see that now for the frame. She called you, as usual, Jeanne-Marie. It's Janet Mary MacGregor, isn't it? I hadn't known you were not Louis's own daughter. Hetty Sinclair confirmed it in a letter, all unknowingly, of course. And I had pieced it together even before that. You said once your mother had married twice."

And he hadn't minded! Janet felt limp. He liked people with spunk. She thought of something. He mustn't think Morgan had known from the start.

"Mr. MacNee -"

He held up an admonishing finger. "None o' that, Janet. We may be connected only loosely, but it's certainly closer than before, when you thought I regarded you simply as a courtesy niece . . . one who would marry my nephew. But you are my beloved grandchildren's sister."

She found difficulty in going on. "Uncle Thomas, I can't tell you how I feel about this. I've so hated playing a part—and liking you from the word go. It was only that I couldn't let the children come out here alone. I *couldn't*. But this wasn't a very honourable way. But you must listen . . . Morgan didn't know. I deceived him too. The solicitor's first letter to him must have been very ambiguous. You know what they are. They don't say things like: 'The children are in the care of their stepsister.' It would be like: 'The children are being cared for by the district nurse at Lochiemuir, Miss Janet MacGregor.'

"The nurse part gave Morgan the idea that I would be suitable to accompany them and he rang me from Newcastle. He got a shock when he saw me. But before he even rang me he phoned our minister's wife and asked was I a suitable person, and somehow or other she managed to say so without telling him who I was. She thought he knew. When he rang me temptation yawned before me and in I went. I've got to say that when Morgan found out—he got mail from the solicitor at Curasao—the fat was really in the fire. We had a frightful row. I thought he might put me ashore at Panama and -"

"And of course he loved you too much by then. Sensible lad. And he was scared I'd blow up and take a scunner at you, and it would be history repeating itself all over again, like Alasdair and Cecile—only you're a different kettle of fish—very different. So he bided his time, thinking if you were here long enough I was bound to like you and would take it easier. It's all right, lassie. I'll not bawl Morgan out either. You were both of you caught in circumstances that were very trying. Your plotting only amused me. I was too full of Elvira's pranks to be angry with you in the first few moments, and I realised when you faced up to that luncheon you had the right stuff in you, and anything you'd done was for the sake of my grandchildren."

Janet found she was shaking. She said unsteadily: "Uncle Thomas, as far as that deed of gift goes it's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me. To think you wanted to give it to me, *knowing I was Jeanne-Marie* ! I do appreciate it, but could you hold it up? I mean—Morgan and I must get things sorted out. I—oh, I can't explain—I feel it's not the sort of thing that can be finalised till Morgan and I are married. Would you do that?"

He bent a searching look upon her. "Janet, there's something not quite right, isn't there? Don't let anything spoil things now. Is there anything a man my age can do to help?"

She said slowly: "I don't know, Uncle Thomas. You see . . . oh, I'm all mixed up. Things have been so different from what I expected. I embarked on this trip to New Zealand on a sudden impulse, and justified it to myself because I thought the children were going to need protecting from an old autocrat. Instead"—she spread her hands out—"I loved you from the moment I arrived. So my justification went. Morgan had found me out. It was an added complication that I began to love him on board ship. Perhaps even before.

"So that spoiled things—a little—too. Nothing has ever been really clear between us. It just shows that though I thought the children needed me, it doesn't really pay to do a right thing in a wrong way. That's probably why Morgan has never been quite frank with me over his affairs. And now, because of what I did, the lies I told and acted, I've spoiled things a bit for you too." She stopped, bit her lip, reached out her hand. "Uncle Thomas, don't try to fix things, will you? I'll think things out a little first. I acted so rashly before. I mustn't repeat past mistakes."

He got up, patted her head, said, "Lassie, there's no need for me to rush my fences. You and Morgan need some time to yourselves. Talk things over quietly—if you can—though sometimes"—he chuckled suddenly with a mischievous mirth that sounded boyish—"talking's not half as effective as kissing!"

He picked up his papers. "I'll put these in my satchel ready for the car. I'm for Gore this afternoon. Pity Morgan had to be away over at Kelso this day. Never mind, you've all your lives ahead of you. And perhaps if you feel there have been restraints, it was only that Morgan was uneasy about keeping that secret from me. Once he knows and sees I dinna care a brass farthing about it—in fact, have had a deal of fun out of it—ye'll be more easy wi' each other."

After he'd gone Janet felt at a loose end. She did a little ironing, put a casserole in the oven, peeled the potatoes and made an apple crunch pudding that could be heated up later. She thought she might go for a good long walk. She left a note for the children to say what she was doing, in case they got in before Morgan.

She could see Angus Gunn and Lance and Rod Wiltshire working on the hill right across Blue Murder Gully. They were burning off gorse that had spread there.

She thought she would like somewhere with a view.

Her steps led her to Skyreach. Not to the house but along the side of the hill and up to the summit.

It was quite a stiff climb and the exercise did her good even if she could not out-race her thoughts. There was no bush on this side of the hill. It had been sown with grass for three-quarters of the way up, then the heights were given over to dry-looking tussock that had an enchantment all its own, bending over before the wind in waves of silver.

This was where Thomas and Isabel in their young days had settled the problems of their courting. Isabel's father in Scotland had, she knew, insisted on her coming out here, unwed, to see if she liked this land, if she truly loved Thomas in his own setting and had not just been carried away by the romance of being courted by a man from so far away. Evidently the course of true love hadn't always run smoothly, because Thomas had told of a quarrel made up by the waters of this mountain tarn.

She rounded the summit, and there, on the farther side, slightly lower than the cairn of stones on the top, lay Pua-o-te-rangi, the Flower-of-the-sky.

She had thought it would be brown and weedy as so many tarns were, with slime at the edges and frogweed. But it just reflected the sky that was a deep winter blue, with cottonwool clouds piling up. It had a clear rock bottom and would be perfect for bathing, come summer. Half a dozen ngaio trees ringed it round, their shiny

fans of leaf clusters glinting in the sun, their gnarled branches leaning over to look at their own reflections.

"When the ngaios bloom," she had heard Morgan telling Therese once, "the flowers float on the surface of the water. They are like faintly pink stars, bigger than daphne, but with the same slightly sparkling petals . . . as if dew had crystallised. And you can't help thinking of the legend and it's impossible to be quarrelsome or noisy up there."

Janet wondered if she would ever see ngaio blossoms floating on Pua-o-te-rangi. Only if she got work in Tapanui and Uncle Thomas insisted that she came often to Windrush Hill to see the triplets. But there would always be restraint between her and Morgan because of all that had happened. One thing she knew . . . they would never, like Thomas and his Isabel, keep a tryst at this lovely, lonely spot.

She came down the Skyreach side of the hill. There below her lay the house in the gracious curve of trees that had been planted more than a century before by people homesick for the trees of Scotland.

In years to come, no doubt, lights would blossom out from those lovely windows, fires would be lit . . . but not by her. She would never stand, lighting Morgan's way home, watching him come in from the stable, stamping his boots to get the snow off, hearing the harness jingling as he carried it in to polish.

She would never go forth from here, as her right, to help him with the lambing. Good job there was a way in from Larch Hill Road . . . even if they improved this access from Windrush Hill, in the deep snows, such as they had not had this winter, it would be too steep for cars. Not that that would be her concern either.

She forsook the track and came down to join the access road to Windrush Hill, just below Skyreach. She looked up, consumed with love for it, and was lost. Just this once she would visit it again, dream over what might have been. No one would ever know.

She walked round to the back, felt the tears start to her eyes as she saw even more progress had been made on the herb-garden. The site of the retaining wall had been prepared, some lichen-covered hill-boulders were piled ready to start. And the centre paving was in, unfinished, but placed in position. An octagonal space was left in the centre. That would be for the little piping figure. A wave of pain washed over Janet. She and Morgan had been so kindred. But even before she had met him, he had belonged to Dallas.

She went into the wash-house, felt for the key, unlocked the back door and stepped into the old part of the house.

She wandered through all the rooms, and in each she spun a new dream. Foolish dreams, all of them. It was such a lovely family house. Some day Morgan Mackay would find a girl he could love *and* respect. In this room his sons would have pillow-fights; in this, his daughters would lie drowsed in sleep, shabby, much-loved dolls on their pillows. In this room . . . Janet opened the bedroom door gently, swung it half open, then, angered suddenly by her own sentimentality, drew it shut with a decisive slam. She would not go in *there*.

She'd get going on the road home. Get the children a snack.. They might like some hot soup. Dinner would have to be late because Thomas was over to Gore. But she'd wait till she was sure the children were home, because she did not want to be alone with Morgan if he had returned.

They would have to have a talk, decide what they would tell Uncle Thomas was the reason for breaking their engagement . . . but not today. She couldn't face it. Actually, she'd prefer to tell Uncle Thomas all of it. But Morgan wouldn't want to tell him he had done it to deceive Arnold. His uncle thought he'd got over Dallas long ago.

Oddly enough, it no longer bothered Janet that this house had been started, at least, with the idea that Dallas would some day be its mistress. Why, she didn't know, but now it seemed free of any thought of Dallas. Perhaps because really, if only Morgan had realised it, this wasn't Dallas's type of house. It wasn't smart enough, elegant enough. She wouldn't care for a house with a little old pioneer cottage incorporated within it.

Suddenly Janet was hungry. That was this rare mountain air. She would make herself a cup of tea and have some biscuits, provided she could work that Primus. Pity the electricity wasn't switched on yet. The fittings were all in place. But she supposed you'd have to start paying a basic monthly charge once it was connected.

Ten minutes later she gave up trying to work the Primus. If only there had been instructions with it or she'd taken more notice when Morgan was doing it. She felt more than ever like a cup of tea.

Ah . . . she remembered noticing the drawing-room fire was set ready. She'd boil the kettle on that. It was a very old blackened one that must have been used on many a picnic fire.

It was set with dry brushwood, mainly manuka. On each side of the fireplace were log boxes like settles. She opened one and found it full of blue-gum logs. She was sparing with the firing because she must be sure the fire was out before she left. She would rake out the ashes and pour water on.

As much as she could enjoy anything today, she enjoyed the tea, sitting on the window-seat, looking down towards Windrush Hill. It was a charming room, with each side of the french windows, sets of small-paned windows that ran the full length of the room. The woodwork was sparkling white. There was one old chair here that would be turfed out eventually, she supposed. It must have belonged to the cottage and was quite hideous, green plush, with roses of faded pink and purple on its spreading lap, edged with curly walnut carving. It had a buttoned back and little squat legs but, Janet found, it was extremely comfortable.

She didn't know how long she had slept till she came up out of a deep and surprisingly refreshing sleep to find the room had darkened. She sprang up, looked at her watch, and realised that though it wasn't terribly late, it was certainly going to rain. She must wash this cup and saucer, rake out the ashes—though they were cold and grey—and get down the hill.

It took only a moment to wash up. She put the cup into another cup on the high shelf she'd got it from and heard them tip over backwards.

She hoped she hadn't broken them or knocked a handle off. She couldn't reach. Not even a kitchen chair here. She went into the drawing-room and lugged out the old easy chair.

She found her heels sank in, low and all as they were, but it gave her enough reach. She rescued the cups unharmed, set them upright, leaned back a little so she could swing the door shut before getting down and felt the chair lurch.

She caught at the swinging door, missed it, grabbed the curved chair-back, brought her full weight on to it and crashed clean over

the top. She knew she was flying through space towards the open door into the connecting hall. Then she knew nothing more.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DOWN at Windrush Hill Morgan was feeling impatient. He'd lost no time getting over here when Uncle Thomas had rung him from the Post Office at Gore. Who would have thought Uncle Thomas would have known, could have known, and had kept quiet all this time too, the old fox. *And* taken it the way he had.

"I don't know what the devil you've been up to, not telling the girl you owned Skyreach . . . perhaps you'll explain to me some day. You could see, surely, that *she* wasn't one to count the bawbees! I tried to smooth things over for you, saying we'd been all so disgusted with Dallas marrying for money that perhaps you'd kept quiet because of that. But I think you've got some explaining to do to her. Though take my tip, lad, don't be too logical and all . . . there are ways and means of convincing women we canna do without them. I'd say kiss first and explain later. Dinna let her slip through your fingers, though. She's in a rare taking-on, though trying to hide it from me. You'll have about an hour before those kids get home, if you leave Kelso now. And if you can't thrash it out in that time you never will.

"Seemingly she thinks that the quarrel you had when you discovered who she was messed things up. She said things had never really been right between you. But I think she's breaking her heart over you just the same. I've been more than suspicious all wasn't well between you, many a time. So get cracking!"

And now Janet wasn't home! Just this note to the children to say she was off for a walk and there were girdle scones in the basket on the kitchen table. There were a dozen places she could have gone walking. Every time Morgan set out along one of the tracks and got out of sight of the house, he decided she'd be returning home by one of the others.

His state of mind communicated itself to the youngsters after they'd been home a while.

"You're fit to tie," was Therese's typical remark. "And like a cat on hot bricks. Janet often takes a walk in the afternoons. She'll be right."

Morgan said anxiously, looking at the sky, "It's going to snow. It's got the feel. The weather report's foul. I heard it at Mengletons' at Kelso."

"Och," said Tommy, "don't fash yourself about Janet. She'll be home long before it snows. She knows the weather signs. Besides, she didn't say put the spuds on— she would have if she had intended to be late. Perhaps she walked up Blue Murder to take tea to the men."

"They were taking it with them. But it's an idea, I'll go up to the stables and saddle up. I could bring her back in front of me if she is."

Connal laughed. "That'd be a sight! She had a skimpy sort of skirt on when we left for school."

He got a clip on his shoulder from his cousin.

The triplets watched Morgan stride off. "What's biting him?" demanded Tommy, scratching his head. "Well, I suppose people in love get a bit queer at times. Have they had a fight?"

"They don't fight, do they?" said Therese. "You'd think they'd have an honest-to-goodness scrap once in a while, wouldn't you? And a lovely making-up."

"Gosh, girls!" said Connal. "They make me sick."

Morgan was back smartly to say there was no sign of Janet. "The men haven't seen her all afternoon. They're busy packing up—Whitecombs is blotted out. See, a real blizzard back there and on its way here. They come down quickly. I'm never so happy when we've had a mild winter like this. I'm going on round the track to Black Pine Ledge. You can see the road to McNeur's there. If she went that way she'd likely come back the same. No, it isn't any use ringing, Tommy. They're out. I passed them on the way back from Kelso. The whole family. Janet wouldn't know."

By the time he got back Thomas was home. "Saw this storm coming and kept up to the limit all the way. From Gore it looked as if it might be hitting here already."

The whole horizon was battleship grey now and they could see strings of sheep moving into the gullies for shelter. The fowls were scurrying into the shelter of the houses, with angry squawkings at the way the wind was scattering their feathers up.

Morgan got busy on the telephone, rang everyone, including the Raymines, to see where Janet was. No one had seen her.

The wind rose to gale force, screamed and shrieked and moaned, beating against the house. The snowflakes hitting against the windows seemed to have ice in them. No soft, silent "fall this. Morgan was out on Ajax, the other men on horseback too. Thomas was desperately uneasy. He said to Morgan once when he returned to the house, "I think she's had a fall. She wasna very happy. I could see that. You know how it is, you walk it off or try to. And some of these gullies are treacherous to a new chum. I wish I'd kept my trap shut. I triggered this off. We'll have to beat some more men up. I'll see to it. If nothing had befallen her she'd have been home by now. Morgan, you've your rifle? Good. Give three

shots if—when you find her. And for God's sake be careful yourself."

"I will." His face was grim, his mouth set. "And Rod must stay here with the Land-Rover at the ready. I'll fire three if I find her, then three more and another three. Just to make sure you get the message—in this screaming gale. Then if she can't walk, and I want the Land-Rover, I'll fire four in three lots."

Up at Skyreach Janet stirred, tried to turn over, but pain stabbed at her left ankle. She lay still for a moment, puzzled at the darkness and the pain. Then memory flooded back. She was up at Skyreach, on its lonely hill, in a house where there was no light, and nobody knew where she was. They would be frantic.

Panic, instantly subdued, rose in her. "Now, Janet," she admonished herself, "no need for that. You'll be found. Besides, this may not be as bad as you think. It may not be a broken bone . . . just a sprain. If you're careful you may be able to hobble downhill. But they'll be in such a pucker about me."

She lifted her head, puzzling over the noise, then realised that the roaring and the swoop and the lash of it all was a gale.

Her senses sorted out the different sounds, then, with despair, she realised it was snowing. How long? How long had she been out to it? How deep would it be? She lifted her left wrist up, but it was no good, it was too dark to see the time. If only it had been luminous!

She lay for a moment, then realised she must do something. She was lying against something that hurt her back. The chair. She pushed it away, turned on to her side, felt no pain, and turned on to her knees. Her right knee hurt abominably. She had to turn back

quickly and in so doing wrenched the ankle again. It was worse than the knee and it meant she couldn't even crawl.

She told herself that as far as she was concerned, there was no immediate cause for panic. She was sheltered from the storm, she would be cold and uncomfortable, but she could not suffer from exposure. But those who were looking for her might.

They would never dream she was here. They would be out, with lanterns, the whole district, searching gullies, streams, cliffs. How dreadful if your own stupid blunder caused injury—perhaps death—to others. She must do something. But what?

How could you signal when you had nothing whatever to signal with?

She thought of the fire she had lit. Thought of something Morgan had once said. How he and Alasdair used to signal to each other from here. That meant you could see these windows from Windrush Hill. But this was the new part, would they still see it? But perhaps only from Alasdair's bedroom, which was Connal's now. No one would be in the bedrooms while she was lost.

But if only she could get that fire going again, these were big windows . . . there was just a chance they would see them and investigate. If only she could crawl! She felt the right knee tenderly. Not a broken bone, merely sore and bruised. Not nearly as bad as the ankle. That was excruciating.

She managed to sit up, leaving the left foot on one side and keeping the right knee rigid. She put a hand each side of her and began shuffling along, sitting up, using her hands to propel her along, towards the door behind her.

She misjudged the position of it at first, but finally found it and was relieved to find her fall hadn't slammed it shut.

She rested against the door jamb, put her hand up to her head, felt a lump. But it was no more than a little tender.

She began to shuffle in the direction of the fireplace. But there wasn't even a glimmer of light from it to guide her. Her spirits sank. If there had been only a faint red glow, enough to build up from. Because she had so carefully put the matches back on the high shelf too.

She sat near the fireplace for a moment, considering it. It was a high-set fireplace. Morgan believed in them. They gave you more draught. She might be able to rekindle it if there was the slightest bit of warmth left. There was no starting wood left in the log-benches, but there was plenty of dry, papery bark peeling off the blue-gum logs. Not an atom of paper as far she could remember.

She put her hand on the bars of the grate. It was faintly warm. She wriggled closer, held her hand over the ashes and heat came up to her. Back to the log box. She felt all round in the vain hope of paper and brought out some logs and began peeling them. No use making too much haste here. She must have a pile of bark, little papery bits and some bigger pieces, because the logs themselves would not burn unless they got a good start.

She felt better for trying this, even though she had little hope it would work. She piled up the pieces in the grate, over the warm spot, laying them on very gently, and hoping against hope a tiny spark would kindle.

She had to force herself to be patient, crossing the thin pieces as best she could, unable to see. She waited a moment or two, then lay down, wincing, waited till the sharp stabs of pain subsided,

then took several deep breaths to fill her lungs and began to blow gently, not to send the hot ash away from the shavings but to force upwards any heat that might still be there.

Twice she drew back ash into her mouth, making her cough and splutter, but she carried on, regulating her blowing more accurately now, so that she closed her mouth quickly after each puff. She didn't know if she were smelling singeing bark or just old smoke, but she kept on and on till she was giddy. Then she saw it, a faint spark.

She had to restrain herself from overdoing the blowing now—it would be so easy to extinguish it. Janet could feel a drumming in her ears . . . she mustn't black out now . . . The spark brightened, caught a curled edge of bark, faintly lighting the darkness, then began to burn in a flame no bigger than a match. But Janet fed two more tiny fragments on without putting it out.

How unbearably slow it was. But scrap by scrap she built it up. She picked up some blue-gum leaves, piled them on. They crackled madly and her fire was away, the aromatic, pungent, heavenly smell filling the room and lighting it up. On went a thin piece of manuka with rough, stringy bark, beautifully dry. On went the first blue-gum log. Presently the whole room was illuminated, and by its light Janet could see snow piled against the window frames at every corner, but she could also see the light streaming out in a shaft beyond the house. Oh, they must see that at Windrush Hill. Besides, men would already be on the hills, perhaps in better vantage points too.

Now she would shuffle over to the window. If men looked up and saw that light they might even see her, silhouetted against it. She might see their lanterns and torches. It would be so comforting. She built the fire up well before she attempted it. The sooner they

saw it, the better, the sooner they would all gather in from these treacherous slopes.

Halfway to the window she got a stab of pain that was so acute she almost blacked out. Afraid she would, and not be able to keep the fire burning, she began to shuffle back after she recovered.

She was almost all in by the time she reached the open log box. Thereafter she stayed there, leaning against it, throwing logs on as they burned away. She must have wrenched herself badly as she fell. Every muscle felt pulled in some way . . .

. . . Morgan had returned Ajax to the stable. Horses were no good now. Besides, if you were looking for a slim slip of a girl who might have broken a leg and fallen in the snow, you needed to be nearer the ground. He had a powerful torch lantern and carried spare batteries.

He was on his way to Skyreach. Not to the house but to The-Flower-of-the-Sky. Thomas had suddenly thought of what he had said to Janet. She might have been tempted to explore that side of the hill.

Morgan climbed steadily, doggedly, without exhausting haste, yet never resting. He came round the shoulder of the hill that loomed above Blue Murder Gully and stopped dead with surprise. Even with the snow driving against him, its particles stinging his eyes, his cheeks . . . he could see a light. A light that was a glow that flickered and leapt ... He must be seeing things.

It was streaming from Skyreach. From the drawing-room windows . . . and it was firelight! But who could it be? Who would light a fire at Skyreach? A swagger? But there were so few these days and

almost always on the main road. This was right off the beaten track for them. Not that he'd blame anyone on a night like this . . . as long as they didn't burn the house down. He'd have to get him to go down to Windrush Hill. But Skyreach was now so well locked up. Still, in a blizzard like this, you'd not worry if you were at the mercy of the elements—you'd break a window.

All of a sudden it hit Morgan ... it could be Janet! She must have been to Pua-o-te-Rangi. She must have injured herself up there and dragged herself here. Hope lit his heart. She'd never give in, that one ... his lass with the delicate air, his indomitable, redoubtable Jane. Morgan, bent double against the force of the wind, almost charged up the rest of the way.

Janet could not hear him for the ferocity of the storm. She felt a little better now. The warmth was helping quite a lot. That, and the thought that she might attract attention, might be able to stop others risking their lives for her on these storm-lashed hillsides.

When Morgan found the key in the lock he was almost sure. He came in at a rush so that Janet had no more time than to raise her head from her hands, resting on the log-box settle, before a light was snapped on . . . the room flooded . . . glorious, wonderful, unbelievable electric light. Then Morgan was kneeling beside her, Morgan's arms were about her, Morgan's voice was saying over and over and over again, "Janet . . . oh, Janet, my darling, my darling!"

Awkwardly she tried to turn to him, he gathered her close . . . this was to be a magic moment, but instead of yielding to him she gave a quick, sharp cry of pain.

Morgan's lips did not reach hers. He said urgently: "Where are you hurt? Is your leg broken? Sorry, sweetheart, I ought not to have grabbed you, only I -"

Janet shook her head, tears standing in her eyes, "No, it's not as bad as that. It's only sprained. But I was so worried about the searchers on a night like this. It's my left ankle and my right knee . . . that's why I couldn't stand on even one leg. I fell off the chair putting the cups back in the cupboard."

For a moment all the alarm and devotion disappeared from Morgan's face. He stared. "You what? Fell off a chair? We—we've been picturing you lost in the snow, fallen over one of the cliffs ..."

Janet looked up at him, pulled a face and said, "I know! Isn't it an anti-climax? And so like me! Romantic things never happen to me . . . only silly things. I feel such a fool!"

Morgan's face crumpled into laughter, then suddenly another expression overtook his features. The hazel-green eyes lit up as Janet had never seen them before. "I don't know what Uncle Thomas would think of my technique. If anyone had told me ten minutes ago I could be laughing now, I'd have been furious. Oh, Janet, my Janet, what a girl you are! But I must get back to the book of rules . . . kiss first, fight afterwards! That's what Uncle Thomas said. Darn it, what am I talking about Uncle Thomas for?"

"Janet, you idiot, nothing matters, explanations, reproaches, what-have-you, against the fact that I love you —have loved you ever since you opened the door to me at Lochiemuir and I lost my heart to your big blue eyes. You've nearly driven me mad! Come on, girl . . . kiss, said Uncle Thomas."

Janet's head came up. Her eyes looked as if there were candles lit behind them. It didn't make sense, but—"Well, why don't you?" she demanded. "I'm tired of waiting."

She got no farther. Thereafter, for a few minutes, speech was impossible for them.

Then, because he, too, needed to breathe, Morgan lifted his head. "Janet, I'll have to postpone this for a bit—but not for too long. I'll have to give the signals to announce I've found you and that I want the Land-Rover up here. They'll see the blaze of lights. Just a moment, I'll put every light in the house on. Why didn't you put them on? Oh, I suppose you couldn't reach the main. I pulled it down as I came in."

"I didn't even know the electricity was connected. But I couldn't have, anyway. Though I'd have had a darned good try."

Morgan went through to the patio from the other side of the house and she heard the shots ring out.

He came back, dropped to his knees beside her, said, "Janet, the explanations will have to wait till we get down to Windrush Hill, I'm afraid. Because I'll have to try to fix you firmly in case any small bones are broken. For lifting into the Land-Rover. Rod will get it up here all right." He grinned. "We won't let anything keep us apart. Imagine Uncle Thomas knowing all the time— and actually enjoying it! Now, how bad are your injuries, love?"

Jane felt so light-hearted with happiness she could scarcely believe she was injured. She said so.

Morgan laughed, kissed her briefly. "I don't think we'll take your shoes and stockings off, that ankle will swell like billy-oh when your shoe comes off, and if you've cut the skin at all, infection may

get in. Rod had a couple of pigs in the Land-Rover yesterday." He stopped, looked at her with a most severe expression. "When I think of the romantic settings we passed up . . . moonlight on the boat deck, tropical islands, sunrise at sea . . . and here, bang in the middle of a proposal . . . or an ultimatum ... I have to talk about swollen ankles and smelly pigs!"

His fingers gently explored her twisted ankle, her rapidly swelling knee. "I'm not experienced enough to say, but I think they are only sprains . . . you probably diagnosed them yourself correctly, Nurse. They'll be uncomfortable enough, but a few days and I'd say you'll be mobile again. I can only be thankful you're not badly injured, perhaps lying in a snowdrift somewhere, suffering from exposure. It won't matter that my scarf is soaking wet and cold. It needs a cold compress anyway."

He bound up her ankle competently and used the sleeve from his shirt to bind the knee. "But I must get you off the floor and make you a hot drink. It will take a bit of manoeuvring to get the Land-Rover up, but the boys will make it all right. I'll bring that wretched chair in."

He put the chair erect, pushed it in, picked Janet up very gently and sat her in it. He went outside, came back with a box, put a couple of sacks on it and lifted both her legs on to it. She could not bend her right knee.

Janet thought to herself that it was like a dream-come-true. He had got over Dallas . . . even to the extent of imagining he'd fallen in love with her, Janet, on sight! She must be careful in the years to come never to reproach him with the fact that he had gone on loving another man's wife. She must not let it rankle. Perhaps their love would never have quite the quality of what he had felt for Dallas, but it would bring a quiet happiness that would grow.

Morgan brought in the tea, and wanted to hold it for her. She shook her head. "My hands are quite steady now."

He looked at her in mock despair. "They ought not to be, Janet. Mine aren't. Now, don't tell me your heart isn't thudding like mine, you cold-blooded little thing . . . yet I could have sworn once or twice, when I've kissed you, that—oh, I mustn't go on like this. You must just about have had it, my gallant Jane. We've got the rest of our lives ahead of us. And some day I'll make you love me as I love you . . . unreservedly, overwhelmingly . . . Janet, don't look at me like that or I won't be able to hold myself in. *Me !* I've never been able to understand till now how some chaps really go overboard for a girl. Mother was getting worried about me. Thought I was completely unnatural because I've never been in love. No wonder when I did fall in love I did everything wrong from the word go. Perhaps there's something to say for experience after all. Now what's the matter?"

Janet put her cup down with a bang on the log box, said wildly, "I don't want that," swallowed, clutched his hands, said: "Morgan, am I going mad? *Never been in love before? But what about Dallas?*"

His brows came down. "What about Dallas? Well, *what* about her? You honestly wouldn't think— couldn't think—oh, hell, here they are! What a night, what a proposal—pigs, snow and now I'm swearing! My apologies, Janet, but it serves you right, you mutton-headed little idiot! Look, we'll have to continue this later if we ever get a moment to ourselves! But just for something to occupy your mind during the drive down, I have never—repeat never—been in love with Dallas in all my life. I'd as soon fall in love with a she-wolf! Come away in, chaps, here she is!"

Rod and Angus had to be told how it had happened, what Janet had done to attract attention . . . then they got her, kept as

immobile as possible, into the Land-Rover, and with Morgan kneeling beside her, holding her as still as he could against the lurching and skidding, they went down to Windrush Hill. Janet's thoughts were whirling; through every jolt of pain that stabbed knee or ankle, she was conscious of inner joy.

At Windrush Hill Thomas was unashamedly wiping away tears. Therese was dry-eyed and very practical, running away up for a nightdress for Janet, and even bringing her, with true Gallic regard for what every woman regards as essential, her brush and comb and make-up kit.

Janet, recovering, was really glad Therese had picked a warm but dainty turquoise nightie, with a yoke embroidered with rosebuds and with nylon frilling. Therese had even got the best blankets out of the spare room and arranged them on the dining-room divan and piled pillows high behind her head.

The men didn't wait. They all had chains on their cars, but wanted to get home while the going was possible. The phone rang incessantly. The boys did the answering.

Janet wouldn't let them contact the doctor. "I'm too scared he might have an accident on the way. I remember only too well the strain of trying to get through storms to sick people. I know enough to realise it's probably only wrenched. Perhaps there's a small bone or two broken, but even if it is that, nothing can be done till it's X-rayed. And I'd hate the doctor to get bogged and be needed elsewhere urgently."

Finally, the triplets were packed off upstairs, Therese saying with importance, "When you carry her upstairs, Morgan, I won't be asleep. I'll come and help her into bed."

His lips twitched as he looked at her. "You will be, poppet. Sound asleep. But I promise to wake you to help me, because Janet and I have things to discuss. We don't feel like going to bed for hours yet. Like fixing the date of our wedding, for instance. If Janet's so fond of Skyreach she can't stay away from it come-wind-come-weather, it will be safer to get her up there permanently as soon as possible. In fact, as soon as Hetty Sinclair gets here. You'd better decide on the colour of that bridesmaid's frock tomorrow, Tessie."

Thomas, his hand holding Therese's, and with the boys in front of him, went smilingly up the stairs.

"This time," said Morgan firmly, "it's going to be explanations first, kisses afterwards."

He leaned on a chair-back, his eyes holding hers and strangely bright.

"Now, would you mind telling me, Miss Janet MacGregor, exactly how you arrived at the conclusion that I was ever in love with that vain, selfish, money-seeking, walking clothes-horse!"

Janet was bubbling over with happiness but still a little puzzled, though sure there must be an explanation.

"Morgan, you used me as a mock fiancée so that Arnold wouldn't suspect that you and Dallas were -"

"Now, don't say it, Janet. I'll get mad. I used you as a mock fiancée so that Arnold—my dear friend—would never again have doubts of Dallas and me. I didn't realise how badly I must have put it ... no wonder I was so sore about your deceiving me like that when I loved you to distraction. I just couldn't believe you had lied to me.

I suppose I was anything but clear. And I didn't dream you'd think I'd ever play round with another chap's wife. It was for Arnold's sake, my love.

"Dallas played havoc with just about every chap in the district—except me. It so happened she never appealed to me. I knew her too well—her tantrums and spitefulness. Arnold began to worship from afar. He'd never been one of the moths round the candle because he thought he was too old for her, and not tall enough—or handsome enough. But she wanted him all right.

Partly because of what he had, but also because she thought she could push him round. Well, she may have talked him into going up near Auckland, but that's nothing. Larch Hill has no very strong ties for Arnold. It's not a place that's been in his family for generations like Windrush Hill. Arnold loves the land—and the life of the land—rand will be quite happy anywhere as long as he's farming.

"But Dallas is not going to be able to twist him round her little finger—and I'm glad of that. Actually, I'm practically sure the very fact that Arnold won't be pushed round is making Dallas take more interest in him. Well, the point is, Arnold was too unsure of himself to actually come to the point, so Dallas—quite unknown to me, of course—decided on some cross-tactics. Tried to make him jealous. Pretended to him that I was burning up for love of her. I suppose she knew that as I was never an admirer of hers, I wouldn't cut up rough as the others would have—at being used like that. So she appealed to Arnold to save her from my attentions! Which she said were distasteful to her."

He grinned. "Was I furious when I found out what she was up to? I blew my top as far as she was concerned. She appealed to my sense of chivalry, begged me not to give her away. But—for a

time—it ruined the friendship between myself and Arnold. However, I thought that didn't matter beside the fact that if Arnold knew he would be disillusioned about his wife-to-be.

"It was a great relief when they went off to England and I hoped I wouldn't run into them at all. Actually, I stayed on the Continent until I knew they were in the States. But when I got a letter from her at Curasao saying she'd heard I was going home on the *Hakoakoa* and had managed to get Arnold—who was unaware—to agree to taking that ship, and what a nice surprise it would be for him, I got the breeze up. A man feels stupid saying this, Janet, but the fact that I never fell for her piqued Dallas's interest. I told her exactly what I thought about her that night I asked you to dance with Arnold so I could have a bit of time alone with Dallas.

I ought to have explained. Only I thought you had realised it was for Arnold's sake I was doing it. But she didn't take much notice. Pretended I was taking a second-best—that we had each made a mistake. Tried to dramatise the whole thing. I didn't have enough time— or privacy—to really let go.

"Then after we got home she came up to Skyreach. I hadn't seen her driving up—I was busy making some tea. I got really alarmed, thought if she kept coming up there talk would soon start. I knew the attachment between you and me was a precarious one—I'd realised quite soon that anything you had done had been in sheer desperation for the children's sakes, as you had believed Uncle Thomas was a tyrant—and I wanted no chance of mischief being made there.

"I said to Uncle Thomas once that Dallas seemed very jealous of you and that I hoped she didn't make any more mischief—well, quite unknown to me, Uncle took matters into his own hands and saw Arnold.

"He told Arnold that it was all moonshine. That there had never been anything between his nephew and Dallas—that she had used me because she had fallen for Arnold in the first place. Arnold, believe it or not, was tickled pink. It made him surer that Dallas loved him. We have our reservations about that, of course. She'd never have loved him had he been a farm labourer.

"That day I first showed you Skyreach I looked out and saw Dallas coming up the hill. She had just heard. She was livid. Arnold had kept my uncle's name out of it, so she thought I had spilled it. I didn't deny it. I told her if she attempted to make any mischief at all between you and me I'd tell you the whole story and she'd look pretty small in your eyes. I felt quite horrible —most ungallant—but I couldn't risk losing *you*. I'd bungled things enough as it was, getting so mad when I found out who you were. But I take it that Uncle Thomas, from what he said when he rang me at Kelso this afternoon, thought you knew all about the Dallas fiasco. He must have thought I'd told you. But Janet, how you could! Did I ever say anything that made you think I was doing anything but sparing Arnold? Was -"

She sat up. "There's something I must know. Something that convinced me Dallas had turned you down. Why did you build a house, and run away to England? I thought you'd gone to lick your wounds. You left it not finished. Why?"

He looked amazed. Then he said slowly, "Ah, I can see how it added up ... to the wrong answer! It's so simple. I couldn't live in the house any longer with Elvira. It was hell. So I thought I'd live on the Skyreach property, and Anne, my sister, was going to take a position at Balloch school—she's a teacher—and we'd set up house together. And she fell in love with a teacher who'd been granted a study scholarship in France. So they married. And Uncle had a lot of business to see to overseas, so there we are."

He paused, looked at her, smilingly. "Janet, don't look at me like that ... all shining-eyed! It's terribly late. You've been through a big ordeal. I ought to be dosing you with aspirin and getting you off to bed ..."

He broke off. She was sitting up against the divan pillows, swathed in pink checked blankets, her shoulders in turquoise frills rising from a cocoon of them, blue eyes wide, cheeks pink, her hair like a golden aureole from Therese's rubbing because it had been thick with snow when they had carried her in.

"Janet, you ought not to look like that . . . about sixteen or less ... in fact, much less. You look like a Botticelli cherub—but you aren't! You aren't, are you, my redoubtable, my formidable, my indomitable Jane! You're a woman, with all that a womanly woman can give her man. Janet -"

"Morgan, if you don't stop talking I'll go mad. Mad! And I *won't* be dosed with aspirin! I *won't* be banished to bed. Didn't Uncle Thomas, wiser than you in his day and generation, say: 'Kiss first . . .?'"

"You saucy Scots baggage, *Jeanne-Marie*," said Morgan. "How right Uncle Thomas was!"

And followed his advice.